

THROUGH OTHER EYES'



# THROUGH OTHER EYES

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ETC., ETC.

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Look not through thine eyes alone;  
Love proclaims us all God's own.  
In thee, as when He fashioned man,  
He crowns the grand creative plan.  
For the work He asks of thee,  
He will give thee eyes to see.  
Look not through thine eyes alone;  
Look through Love, and claim thine own.

A.M.



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## CHAPTER I.

### ERNEST MUSPRATT'S DISCOVERY.

THE flush of a summer morning was kissing the languor of sleep from the scented boughs of a spreading lime tree. Through the glimmering haze the sunshafts pierced; the golden light tipping the topmost droop of green, creeping downwards into the honey-coloured dips and hollows where the bees would soon be humming in the fragrant warmth. Down, down, till a stretch of rounded bark glimmered, grey and smooth.

The short hour'd night was past : the sounds of awakening life deepened. In the coppice of silver birch the ring-doves were crooning their plaintive love duets. Above a belt of grim old Scotch pines the rooks were winging inland, a harsh caw breaking the hush of the summer quiet. Meadows deep in grass and hedged by banks of wild rose, revealed themselves from out of their misty shrouds; here and there a stately elm, proud and serenely still, raised its canopies of green above the lesser trees of the field.

All so typical of the peace and mellow sweetness of rural sylvan England.

At the corner of a meadow, the wooden bars of a gate caught a downward glint of light as it flickered through the boughs of the lime tree : on the hedgerow side of the gate was a stile, with wide steps, and the path that ran along by the side of the hedgerow was a right-of-way.

A horse and his rider were leisurely approaching the gate. The horse was an old thoroughbred ; a dark chestnut with a white star on his forehead. The reins were hanging loose on his neck, and he picked his way with lazy indifference, begotten of an intimate knowledge of his surroundings. On reaching the gate he rested his nose against the topmost bar, and twitched one ear interrogatively.

Was it to be opened for him, or was he to open it for himself ? It would appear as though his rider intended to ruminate quietly and do nothing. A clock, from a belfry tower, hidden amongst the trees in the near distance, struck seven.

The saddle creaked, and the stirrup leathers tightened with the upward stretching of an arm. There was the sound of snapping wood, and a bunch of something cool, and leafy, and fragrant, was laid across the chestnut's shoulder. Then the handle of an old hunting crop slid

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along his neck and the latch of the gate was lifted.

The horse pressed his shoulder against the gate and passed through. With a swish of his long tail he cleared its swing as it clicked back to the catch, and moved on at a quickened pace.

He was checked gently but firmly.

"No, old boy, I'm not ready to go home yet."

A gap in the hedge showed to the right. The chestnut was put to it, and brushed through into a narrow track winding amidst a tangle of low undergrowth. A clearing broke ahead, as the ground fell away in a sharp dip, and there lay before the eye, in long stretches of open country, an English common.

There were miles of it; gorse clothed, with here and there a clump of wind-swept oaks girdling a thatched cottage. Streaks of greyish white glimmered where the sand pits scarred the green; amongst the ups and downs of the apparently flat surface a tracery of thread-like lines defined the paths trodden in by the cows and donkeys and vagrant animal life which pastured there. No definite contour of a village marked the outlook. As in centuries past the squatter population had dumped down their habitations on any likely spot which afforded herbage for their beasts and the prospect of a potato patch and fuel for the gather-

ing, so no rule of municipal order had regulated their actions, and things remained as they had always been.

The rider brought his horse to a standstill, and shielding his eyes from the morning sun sat motionless, looking out over the scene before him. It was as typically English as the sylvan beauty through which he had just passed. He drew in a long deep breath of the morning air, fragrant with a thousand sweetnesses from the wild free land over which it swept, and then, with a gesture as simple as the drawing in of that long deep breath, he bared his head to the rapture of Nature's morning hymn of praise. It was the action of one to whom the offering of praise was as natural as the soaring of the lark's song heavenward.

A road of sorts traversed the common. It was soft and sandy with a margin of turf on either side. The chestnut naturally chose the turf to walk on. He did not know where he was going, and for that matter neither did his rider.

Ernest Muspratt's chief joy in these early perambulations was to allow time, place, and circumstance to blow him like a dandelion seed before the wind. The busy things of life filled up the days with so much that was obviously necessary that it left him no time for peaceful



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musings or taking stock of himself. While the dew still spangled the morning grass, there was leisure to attend to introspective matters, and the simplicities of Nature were so much more educating than the complexities of life.

After proceeding for some few hundred yards along the turf-bordered road, Ernest became aware that he was being followed. An instinctive perception supplied the knowledge, as the soft ground deadened any noise of footsteps.

He glanced back. A small figure was patterning along in the dust, quite near, but keeping at a respectful distance from the chestnut's heels.

"A little boy carrying a dead sparrow. Now what is he going to do with that sparrow? It hasn't got a head."

Interesting results followed on such very trifling incidents. Ernest's custom was to grasp such opportunities.

He beckoned to his follower to draw near. The boy was very small. As he trotted alongside, dangling the limp body of the sparrow in one hand, a course of catechism between man and child began in this fashion.

"What are you going to do with that dead bird?"

"I'm going to take it to Miss Sunshine. I'll get a penny for it."

"Miss Sunshine? That's a pretty name. Where does Miss Sunshine live?"

"She lives with Mrs. Fancy."

"Sunshine and Fancy," murmured Ernest. "Delightful!" He felt impelled to go on asking questions.

"What will Miss Sunshine do with a dead sparrow?"

"It's for Mr. Brown. Mr. Brown, 'e eats a sparrer every marnin'."

"Dear, dear!" ejaculated Ernest. The subject was becoming complicated.

"Who is Mr. Brown?" he asked.

The boy jerked the sparrow up and down like a jumping jack.

"Mr. Brown 'e's a owl. When 'e's a eatin' of his sparrer, Miss Sunshine, she makes me draw'r the curtains 'cross his cage. He must have his sparrer, but she don't like to hear him tearin' of it."

"And do you always bring a sparrow without a head?" enquired Ernest.

The boy considered for a moment.

"My Grandad—we lives with Grandad. 'E's the thatcher—'e belongs to the rat and sparrer club. You has to collec' a 'undred

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'eads an' a 'undred tails a month else you're fined a shillin.' They has 'em all laid out on a table, and then they're counted. I gets a penny for Mr. Brown's sparrer, an' I keeps the 'ead for Grandad. It's payin'."

Ernest gazed meditatively at the mop of sun-bleached hair which was bobbing up and down within a few inches of the toe of his boot.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Eli Blades."

"Eli! Why Eli?"

"We're chapel, we are. That's why."

Ernest began to fumble in his pocket. If a dead sparrow were worth a penny, a small boy so interesting as Eli Blades was surely worth threepence. He had intended to drop the coins into the ragged pocket gaping emptily open; but, as he stooped down to do so, the child suddenly darted from his side and disappeared behind a high growing clump of blackthorn. A well-worn path was beaten into the turf at that particular spot; and, without giving himself time to hesitate, Ernest followed in the wake of the pattering brown feet. Before he realised where he was or what he was going to do, he had rounded the thicket, and found himself brought up suddenly in front of a low fence. He was staring straight into the precincts of a small dwelling, the like of which

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was such a surprise that for sheer delight he could not remove his eyes from it. Then he became aware that, within a few paces of the fence, a woman was lying on a low couch, and was looking at him with startled eyes of enquiry.

"I beg your pardon," he said, taking off his hat quickly. "This charming scene broke on me so suddenly that——"

A shrill voice suspended the remainder of his apology. Eli Blades shot up from the inside of the fence, where he had been crouching beside a large wicker cage.

"'E's out," he piped. "Mr. Brown, 'e's flewed out. 'E grabbed the sparrer that 'ard, I couldn't 'old 'im."

A large brown owl, dazed with unaccustomed light and liberty, flopped on to the top of the fence, and, clinging to it, swayed for a few minutes uncertainly backwards and forwards. It stared at Ernest unseeingly with its round yellow eyes, and then, struggling to spread its wings, bungled stupidly on to the front of his saddle, and tangled its claws in the bunch of lime blossom.

Ernest covered the bird with a protecting hand, and smoothing its ruffled plumage placed it carefully inside the breast of his coat, and buttoned the flap. He slipped his feet out of the stirrups, and, sliding to the ground, hitched

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the chestnut's rein to one of the posts of the fence.

“Oh, Mr. Brown, what a nice owl you are,” he murmured tenderly, as he felt the bird's claws against his waistcoat. “Now I shall have the right to open that little wicket gate, and you shall introduce me to Miss Sunshine.”

## CHAPTER II.

### INSIDE THE FENCE.

THE wicket gate opened with a little upward kick, which implied that it had a sense of humour and was enjoying the situation.

Ernest paused momentarily before entering. Not from embarrassment—for he was of such an entirely unself-conscious nature that he never distrusted his reception—but because the peculiar charm of this delightful discovery struck him afresh.

A century, at least, must have given its years to mellow this little paradise into the peace of sweet old age to which it had attained. The cottage had white-washed walls, and the thatched roof projected its arched eaves with cherishing care over the little latticed windows, which were thrown wide open to the morning sun, and pots of red geraniums and yellow musk stood in blue saucers along the sills.

The gnarled branches of a venerable vine clambered round the door and reached from the

box border, which was sweet with simple cottage flowers, to where it could curl its topmost tendrils about the dark beams of the upper storey. The pathway leading up from the wicket gate bordered a strip of trimly kept grass, on which flourished one big standard rose tree. Its stem was straight and sturdy, and such a wealth of bloom and foliage sprouted out in a symmetrical bunch all round its top, that it looked like a giant edition of the impossible tree in a child's toy-box.

The general setting of the cottage produced the sensation of privacy and limitless freedom. The view was unbroken; to east and south and west the sky merged indefinitely into the low line of the horizon. The turf of the common came right up to the fence; beyond the wicket gate the wayfarer could choose his own path.

To reach the lady of the cottage, in order to deliver up his captive, Ernest had to pass in front of the little lattice windows, and he discovered that an extension of the cottage, thickly thatched, sloped downwards along the western wall. Its interior was evidently large and roomy, for through a half-open door, weather-stained to that colour of sea-green blue of which only the suns of many summers and the blasts of many winters know the unattain-

able secret, an idea of its construction and high beamed roof could be discerned.

The lady's couch was placed beside the standard rose tree. It was so big that she was almost under the shade of it and of the old vine, which had spared some of its branches to clamber over an erection of rough poles propped against the house wall. It was all a picture of tender lights and quivering shadows. The pink of rose bloom blended with the soft colouring of the bricks which flagged the pathway; the coverlet which was thrown over the couch bore a kinship in harmony with the tints of the old door.

The lady watched Ernest's approach wonderingly. Seen from over the top of the fence her impression of him had been vague. He was riding a well-bred horse and his voice had sounded pleasant and refined, but seen on foot, this early-morning knight-errant looked strangely at variance with anything equestrian. He was of medium height, slightly built, with a clean-shaven sensitive face. He was wearing an old black slouch hat, shepherd plaid trousers, and a nondescript kind of coat. A fly-away French tie seemed to apologise for anything unconventional in his being where he was.

He came to a standstill by the end of the



couch, and, again removing the old slouch hat, said politely, "I have brought back Mr. Brown."

His expression was so ingenuously happy that Sunshine felt she had known him for quite a long time. The sincere loveliness of Ernest's nature spoke directly for him the moment he opened his mouth. Some irresistible attraction drew people to him. Unconsciously he insisted upon being liked.

Although there was no scrutiny in his eyes, he had taken in the significance of the scene before him at a glance. "Such a fragile little thing, the pity of it," was his inward comment. And because he possessed the kindest gentlest heart that ever ached on earth, he realised what it all meant.

"How did you know that my owl was called Mr. Brown?" asked Sunshine.

She smiled a little as she put the question, and Ernest rejoiced. The lines of repression about her lips had relaxed. There were too many of these little lines of repression, Ernest thought.

He cautiously unbuttoned his coat and produced Mr. Brown.

"I hope I haven't hurt him," he said.

"I am sure you have not," and Sunshine smiled again.

"Would you mind putting him back into his

cage?" she said, "and—please draw the curtains."

Ernest nodded.

"I know. He's got a kind of cannibal recess, where he retires for breakfast, hasn't he? I know all about him. I foregathered with Eli Blades on my way here."

Ernest put Mr. Brown into his cage, and secluded him behind the curtains. When he returned, Sunshine said a little apologetically:

"He was given to me—I—I don't like the sparrow part of it at all."

Ernest's eyes suddenly fell on a low rustic table which he had not noticed before. The preparations for a simple breakfast were laid on it, but the teapot had not yet made its appearance.

"I am so sorry," he exclaimed with compunction. "I am interrupting. I won't stay. I did not see that your breakfast was waiting."

He was about to bow himself off the premises when a figure, emerging unexpectedly from the cottage door, bumped into him. He felt the rattle of a tray behind his back, and heard a female voice exclaim,

"Why, dear 'art alive, whatever is this?"

"Mrs. Fancy, undoubtedly," murmured Ernest, edging away from the tray. He glanced at Sunshine, but her expression was

slightly enigmatical. She raised her eyebrows, and looked at Mrs. Fancy as though asking something of her. Ernest had an odd kind of feeling that it was an appeal on his behalf, and it seemed to establish a bond of understanding which pleased him exceedingly. If Mrs. Fancy were being asked to take the initiative, he must at once make friends with Mrs. Fancy. He could see her now, for he had rounded the tray.

Would she be easy to make friends with? Fat and comfortable, from the bib of her apron to the toes of her shoes he felt convinced she was a bundle of bountiful goodness. That expression on her face, half fright and half suspicion, was only natural under the circumstances. He knew what it meant. She was an adoring tyrant, with watch-dog instincts, and for all she knew he might be any tramp who had passed the night under a haystack.

For the third time the old slouch hat was swept from his head, and he was about to explain himself, when something occurred which entirely changed the aspect of affairs.

The old chestnut had been standing with his head over the fence, waiting with resigned patience. The flies began to worry him, and he stamped and switched his tail.

The sound attracted Mrs. Fancy; her atten-

tion was caught and riveted. Her eyes grew round, and a radiance of ineffable delight rippled all over her fat face. Then she looked from Ernest to the horse and then back again. To his unbounded astonishment, she addressed Sunshine in a wheedling tone which had a note of tremulous excitement running through it.

"The gentleman aint goin' away without a cup of tea, now is 'e? And me just bringin' out the teapot. I've got a extra cup 'ere."

She turned to Ernest.

"It ain't no trouble. Miss Sunshine, she's 'avin' her tea. An' there! There's a sayin' as a hen can scratch as well for ten chickens as one."

Sunshine's face betrayed as much astonishment as Ernest's, but the expression was fleeting. Comprehension quickly followed on astonishment.

"Would you like to tie your horse up somewhere in the shade?" she suggested; and Ernest thought he saw a suspicion of another little smile quiver about her mouth.

But Mrs. Fancy's eyes were on the chestnut. She was addressing to him across the fence endearing words which he seemed to understand.

"You leave that 'orse to me," she said to

Ernest. "I knows all about 'orses; I was brought up among 'em."

She put down the teapot and bustled back into the cottage. A minute later she reappeared, busily untying the knots from a piece of rope, and hurried down the pathway to the gate. A large white cat made its appearance from somewhere, and, with its tail carried straight on end like a bottle brush, followed behind. It was obviously quite true that Mrs. Fancy understood horses, for the chestnut received her with the utmost confidence, and the two were seen to disappear round the corner of the blackthorn hedge, with Mrs. Fancy's fat shoulder pressing affectionately against the horse's sleek neck.

Ernest and Sunshine were left to look at each other over the top of the teapot.

"Ought I to acquiesce in this hen-scratching invitation?" Ernest was asking himself.

"I am afraid there is only tea and bread and butter to offer you," said Sunshine. And of course that settled the matter.

Ernest had found a seat for himself. It was the stump of a tree which had been sawn off close to the root, and, though rather hard, he did not mind, for it placed him on a level with Sunshine and the rustic table.

It appeared in no way strange to be break-

fasting at that early hour in the morning with an unknown lady. The odd manner of his introduction, and the simplicity of the meal, and Mrs. Fancy, of course, made it seem quite all right. He accepted his cup, and placed it on the nicely scrubbed bricks beside him. That was an advantage of sitting on a tree stump. It was so conveniently near the ground.

"This is exceedingly pleasant," he remarked. "Shall I pass you the bread and butter? One does this kind of thing naturally abroad, but so seldom at home. I mean," he added, "having meals out of doors. I've just come back from being on the wander."

"How nice to be able to wander," said Sunshine.

There was no note of discontent in her voice, only a little wistfulness.

Ernest replaced the plate of bread and butter.

"My wanderings have generally an object," he said. "Would it interest you if I explained? You see—I heard about you and Mrs. Fancy from Eli Blades, but you don't know anything about me."

"I know just a little," said Sunshine. "Eli Blades arrived with his sparrow one minute before your horse's nose appeared round the corner of the fence. I heard him exclaim—

'Here comes the gentleman what asks questions.'"

Ernest threw back his head and laughed.

"It shows how one gives oneself away. I'm a schoolmaster. Not a settled one; a kind of a free lance. It's so much more interesting to carry out one's own ideas than be tied down to regulations. I can't follow systems," he admitted frankly. "One can't develop much on a system, and I'm always on the look-out for something to develop."

Sunshine was a little puzzled.

"Do you just wander about on that old chestnut trying to find things to develop?" she asked.

"The chestnut's not mine," said Ernest. "That's how he suits me. He knows his way about, and I don't. He belongs to the place where I'm stopping. It's a place I'm interested in; they take boys to push them on you know." He waved a hand vaguely in the direction from which he had come. "It's not far from here. I'm very fond of boys. Dear lads. After they've done with school and so on, they often don't know what to do with themselves. The finding what's in a boy and how to get it out of him is most stimulating."

"Do your experiments always turn out well?" asked Sunshine. "The boys I mean."

"If I can find out how to get at them," answered Ernest. He had taken his hat off and laid it down on the bricks beside his cup. He ran his fingers through his hair, and was evidently a little perplexed.

"It's like this," he said. "I often know what possibilities there are in a boy, but I'm bothered as to how to find the right atmosphere—the influences that he's most susceptible to mean such a lot. Under one set of influences he'd never find himself, under another he'd grow. Grow from the inside, I mean."

He leant forward. "This doesn't bore you, does it? No! Well, I'm worrying out a case now. Such a dear boy. He's—let me see!—Well, he's not just a boy; Johnnie must be twenty-two or thereabouts; but he's as sound asleep as a baby. I know his people, quite useless to him. Far too much money and a home that's run like an hotel restaurant. What does a boy like that do? He's got nothing to do and too much time to do it in. I've just come back from running him to ground at Ostend. Mixed bathing you know and——"

Ernest paused for a moment's reflection. Sunshine was such a nice listener; she looked interested, and he felt very confidentially inclined. He allowed his tongue to run on again glibly.



"I thought the best way out of the difficulty was for me to join the society I found him in. The mixed bathing. It was rather a mixed mixture. The place wasn't more than about forty feet across and a few hundred yards long, and there were something like three thousand people in it."

Sunshine said "Oh!"

"But I hadn't a bathing dress," continued Ernest. "And do you know that helped more than anything, because of the friendly feeling it started. There had been an extra run on bathing dresses, and the only thing I could find was a sort of red suit with black trimmings full of holes. You can't think how kind those people were. They patched me up. I had a blue bow here, and a red one there, and a kind of chess-board arrangement down my back."

With a few deft gestures he illustrated his description.

A fleeting wonder, and something besides wonder was depicted on Sunshine's face.

"It's worth while being taken for a lunatic if it amuses her," Ernest assured himself inwardly.

"I got my boy away quite pleasantly after that. He's here—at this place I told you about. He's set down to learn land-agency, and so on. He'll come in for a big place some day, and he ought to know how to look after it."

Ernest was struck by a sudden inspiration.

"Would you like to see him?" he asked. "May I bring him here? It would do him such a lot of good."

Sunshine's eyes opened wide, and a little pink crept into her cheeks.

"There now! I oughtn't to have said that," declared Ernest penitently. "It might tire you to have him, and I should be sorry."

But Sunshine was thinking.

"Things that help you to forget yourself don't tire you in the ordinary way. At least—they leave something behind. They widen the distance," she said hesitatingly.

"Widen the distance—enlarge the capacities of our borders—yes, that's it."

Ernest spoke softly as though to himself. There fell one of those inexplicable little silences which transpire when two people seem to be brought very near to each other without knowing why. It lasted but for a few brief moments. Ernest returned to the subject of his boy.

"What he wants, dear lad, is to be mothered, and the love laid on thick. I don't mean a coddling fussiness; but the kind of mothering that makes him want to mother his own mother. He's never had to consider the small wants of a woman. He's never had anything exacted

from him that would bring out the feeling of protectiveness of sex. I believe his natural instincts are as domestic as a cat's, but nobody wants them."

Sunshine's gaze travelled slowly from the boundary of the fence to the cottage, with its windows gay with flowers. All the signs of shelter and security which surrounded her were so evident. The small feminine trifles that she liked to have about her lay close to her hand. She was the pivot round which all centred. She loved her treasures; she loved her home. Its tranquillity, its harmony, and the homewarmth of its atmosphere were her life. Did she owe a debt of generosity to such things?

"Widen the distance—enlarge the capacities of our borders!"

Ernest's words had taken hold of her. She would have liked to question him about the significance of that word capacities. He seemed to have laid stress on it. She could not go out into the world and widen the borders of her life; but capacities were things which lay closely and intimately. They could be shared; they could be used in all sorts of ways. The capacity for loving a thing could be multiplied a thousandfold if others loved it too.

But she hesitated to question. A shyness born of long submission to enforced inaction

restrained her. She only said questioningly :

“What would Mrs. Fancy say?”

“Johnnie is beautiful to look at,” said Ernest.

“Is he big? Could he sit on that tree stump?”

“I think he’s somewhere over six foot,” said Ernest. “He’d probably sit on the fence, and prop himself up against one of the posts. I’m trying to break him off that habit of propping himself up. It seems the fashion with young men. Such a loungy habit. He’s not really lazy, and he’s as strong as a horse.”

A few minutes later Ernest rose, preparatory to taking his leave. He apologised for having stayed so long.

“And if Johnnie turns up you’ll know who he is, won’t you?” he said. “He’ll say something about me—Ernest he’ll call me. They all call me Ernest. Not disrespectfully; they seem to like it, and I don’t mind. Johnnie—Johnnie Vivian is his name. I think I’d better let him come by himself; you’d get to know him better that way.”

Ernest picked up his hat.

“I have to thank you for a most pleasant morning,” he said. “I hope you often breakfast out of doors. The best bit of a summer day is before the dew is off the grass.”

“Before the dew is off the grass,” repeated

Sunshine. "To feel the cool wet swish of grass about one's feet. How delicious is grass with the scent of clover in it!"

She sighed a little. "The hedgerows are full of wild rose and honey-suckle now, aren't they? I sometimes long to look up into the branches of big green trees. Is the lime blossom out?"

Ernest murmured something rather vague. He could not explain. A sudden huskiness seemed to have come into his voice. So he went away quietly, and said nothing.

When, a little later, Mrs. Fancy came out to carry away the breakfast-tray, she thought Sunshine was asleep.

For a woman of her weight Mrs. Fancy moved very lightly. Sunshine was not asleep. Through her half-closed eyelids she watched Mrs. Fancy clear the table and remove the cups and saucers, and then return treading cautiously. She was carrying an old brown watering-can, into which had been thrust a great blooming bunch of lime blossom.

She deposited the brown can on the bricks beside the tree stump, and then stood undecided. Sunshine was tired out. No wonder. It was her fault, and remorse was pulling at her heart-strings. She must never allow such a thing to happen again. What had she been thinking

about to let a complete stranger disturb the privacy of her little lady? It was all the fault of that old chestnut. He was a love! She could still feel the velvety warmth of his soft muzzle against her cheek. She dared not disturb Sunshine, and yet there was something she had promised to do. How weak she had been to give that promise! Everything she had done that morning had been weak.

She tiptoed back into the cottage, and returned with a calling card which Ernest had left behind him. She curled it up into a little white funnel, and stuck it into the spout of the watering-can.

"There now, I've done it—surreptitious like; but I've done what 'e asked," she said to herself, as she retired for the last time. "'E was nice spoken an' a gentleman; tho' I must say as I've seen better clothes on a 'op picker."

Sunshine opened her eyes after Mrs. Fancy had gone. She could reach the old watering-can from where she lay. Tenderly and with caressing fingers she touched the clusters of blossom; loosening the tightly bunched stems, and turning the brown can this way and that to watch the sunlight flickering through the amber and green. The card dropped out of the spout, and she picked it up and read the name. It had not occurred to her to wonder what Ernest's

name was! He seemed to have explained himself quite well without a name. She drew the old brown can nearer, and, bending down, buried her face amongst the honey-scented blooms, inhaling their fragrance in a rapture of gratitude.

## CHAPTER III.

### THE DOMESTICATING OF JOHNNIE.

ERNEST had no idea of allowing the grass to grow under his feet; Johnnie made his appearance at the cottage the following afternoon, and curiously enough Mrs. Fancy was again not on guard. She had "popped" out to buy some eggs from a neighbouring cottager, and her return had been delayed.

Johnnie was certainly very good-looking, Sunshine decided. A handsome type of the Saxon order. He had sunny hair, with a pretty wave in it, and the clear fresh wholesome look which goes with a fine physique and superb health. He did not appear to be lacking in manners, for he introduced himself quite nicely; but, after the necessity of introduction was over, all effort ceased, and conversation became difficult. He did exactly what Ernest had said he would do. He seated himself on the fence, and, propping himself up against a post, lit a cigarette.

The fence was so near to Sunshine's couch, that she could talk to anyone seated on it



without raising her voice. But she felt a little anxious about the fence. It was old and sadly frail, though the creepers which clung to it sought to shelter its frailty.

Could it bear such a burden? Johnnie was much bigger than she had expected.

He was not only very good-looking, but he was very well turned out in every way. It was obvious that he had not yet adopted country working-clothes. Bond Street was responsible for the cut of his coat. It gave him a beautiful waist, and his mauve silk socks showed to advantage as he hitched up the knees of his trousers, and arranged his long legs so as to rest them on the crossbar of the fence.

Sunshine kept conversation alive, but it did not run fluently. If she asked a direct question, Johnnie answered it; but to take the initiative and exert himself! No, that did not occur to him. He smoked in a casual, absent-minded way, taking a few whiffs of a cigarette and then dropping it to light a fresh one. He seemed to be more interested in striking matches than anything else. He was gradually surrounding himself with a small cemetery of match ends, and half-smoked cigarettes.

"What can I do with him? It's quite true that he's as sound asleep as a baby. He ought to be given a fright to wake him up," solilo-

quized Sunshine. She was beginning to feel a little tired and anxious. Anxiety became acute when ominous sounds were heard of wood cracking in a succession of violent snaps, and the piece of fence on which Johnnie was sitting collapsed.

The collapse occurred so suddenly that he had no time to save himself. From the heap of debris a pair of legs pointed skywards, and Johnnie's powers of speech found expression as he lay on his back and apostrophized his mauve silk socks.

Almost simultaneously with the collapse of the fence the latch of the wicket gate clicked. It swung open, and a girl passed through. She saw Sunshine trying to raise herself up to see what had happened, and she hurried up the pathway. Sunshine pointed to the yawning gap in front of her.

"Go and look," she said. "I can't see anything from here except his legs."

The fence had broken outwards. Maisie Yorke crossed the narrow strip of green and peered over. Her little enquiring nose looked as if it were meant to peer over fences. The sunlight caught the bright auburn of her hair, turning it almost to red, and her pretty mouth widened into a mischievous smile. Then she laughed outright, and there was not a spark of

commiseration in her eyes. They were hazel eyes. The short dark lashes and the finely pencilled eyebrows were several shades darker than her hair, and showed up vividly the smooth white of her skin.

She certainly had Johnnie at a disadvantage. He was too astonished at her sudden appearance to say anything. He ruminated perplexedly.

"Now, I wonder who this ginger-haired girl is?"

The ginger-haired girl ceased her merriment. She was surveying Johnnie with the critical frankness of youth. Johnnie gathered himself together and sat up. He began picking off the little bits of wood which were sticking to his clothes, and dusted his trousers.

"What a pity you've broken the fence," said Maisie.

"Maisie, Maisie!" remonstrated Sunshine. "Ask if he's hurt."

Maisie barely troubled to lower her voice.

"There's nothing the matter with him. He's just sitting there." She stooped to gather up a piece of broken plank, and tried to fit it into its place.

"Oh, dear!" she exclaimed, "it will never stand up again. I did so love this old fence.

The yellow creeper that used to grow on this side has had its arms squashed quite flat."

Johnnie was still ruminating. He had risen to his feet, and was regarding the destruction he had caused with a mild kind of wonder.

"You must help to mend it," said Maisie with decision. "All the stray beasts on the common will come wandering in if its left like this all night."

Johnnie had never mended a fence in his life. He was so big that he could look down with ease on this slip of a girl, and yet she made him feel quite small. Without saying anything, he began to pick up one or two splinters of broken wood which lay near, and laid them in a heap. Maisie picked up three pieces to his one.

"My heap's bigger than yours," she said; and Johnnie was obliged to admit that it was.

"You can make yours bigger if you work harder." There was a mocking challenge in Maisie's eyes, and a delicious dimple showed at the corner of her mouth.

Sunshine was a silent watcher. She could see the two heads as they moved up and down against the sky line; but the hole in the fence did not give a very wide view of what was going on.

Then one head disappeared. Maisie had seated herself on her heap of wood, and was

issuing her commands as to what Johnnie was to do and how he was to do it.

"No, not like that. Put the rubbish in one heap, and what can be used again in another. Yes, that's better. The stumps of the posts will have to come out. Can you pull up a stump?"

The first stump came away in Johnnie's hand as easily as if he had been pulling up a radish.

Maisie condescended to approve.

"Now, we must find something to patch up the hole with," she said. "You can pull up the rest of these stumps while I go and talk to Sunshine about what we are to do next."

Johnnie was left to his own devices, and Maisie, stepping lightly over the litter of broken wood, passed through the hole in the fence, and, coming over to Sunshine's couch, stooped down and put her arms round her neck.

"Darling," she whispered, "who is this tired straw?"

Sunshine whispered Johnnie's name, and gave a trifling sketch of Ernest, and what had happened the day before. "He's been sent here to be domesticated. You must help to do it," she added.

Maisie raised her head and laughed a little wickedly.

"It's begun; it began when he broke the

fence. Did you ask him to sit on that crumbly bit on purpose? I believe you did."

She was chided for her impertinence, and told not to talk so loud, but paid no attention.

"He's not listening. He can do only one thing at a time, and he's pulling up stumps. Now, what's to be done about mending the fence. He must do that, of course, because he broke it. Where's Mrs. Fancy?"

Sunshine explained.

"May we go and rummage in that delicious old place?" Maisie nodded in the direction of the old blue door. "There's a wood-stack in there, and I know where Mrs. Fancy hides the hammer and the nails."

She received the desired permission.

"Do you think he knows how to use a hammer?" questioned Sunshine.

"He can be taught. It's a very domestic thing," laughed Maisie, and she returned to the gap and Johnnie.

"Will you come and help to carry out some wood to mend the fence?" she asked, and she added approvingly, "You've tidied up quite nicely."

Johnnie surveyed his work, and was conscious of having won approval. A little trickle of pleasurable anticipation as to what was going

to happen next stirred him. He followed obediently in the direction led by Maisie.

He had to pass Sunshine's couch, and she looked up at him and smiled. He hesitated, and then stopped.

"I am sorry I broke the fence," he said; and Sunshine saw that there was quite an honest regret in his eyes. His apparent casualness seemed at variance with that look. He spoke as though asking to be understood.

Sunshine answered quickly: "I am afraid it gave you a nasty fall. You are going to mend it for me, aren't you? I shall look on and watch, and almost feel as though I were doing it myself. I should love to work with a hammer and nails, but—I can't you see."

This point of view, of regarding the result of a catastrophe as a source of interest, was a novelty to Johnnie. And, just as to Ernest, the significance of what lay behind had appealed, so it appealed to him. Behind this helplessness was an eager spirit which had to do everything through someone else. He had more strength than he had any use for. He had just succeeded in making a nuisance of himself by being so big and strong, and here was this fragile little thing who would love to hammer a nail into a piece of wood and couldn't. Why were things so at odds in the world?

Maisie claimed his attention, and he gave up puzzling.

"Help me to get down this shutter," she said. "There's a window behind it, but it's kept barred because the glass is broken and cats get in."

In the gloom, Johnnie could hardly see what he was doing, but Maisie's voice guided him. The shutter was thickly covered with cobwebs, and a shower of crumbling plaster fell from the casement as it was wrenched inwards. A rich flood of western sunlight streamed in through the opening.

"What a jolly old place!" exclaimed Johnnie involuntarily.

"Isn't it?" said Maisie. "It's really the old original squatter bit of the cottage. Do you see that odd shaped recess in the wall? It's all choked with rubbish, but that's where the kitchen fireplace was. You could sit in there. Isn't the raftered roof quaint? It goes up the whole height of the cottage. Do you see these hooks fastened into that beam? That's where they hung their bacon and strings of onions and apples in the winter time."

Johnnie laid back his head and gazed upwards.

"What's that long thing that runs across



under the rafters? It's like the boom of a ship."

"That was the goose roost," said Maisie.

Johnnie looked at her doubtfully.

"It's quite true," she asserted. "They used to graze great flocks of geese on the common, and donkeys, and pigs, and cows, and horses if they had them. They can now; it's all free."

Johnnie's gaze went back to the goose roost. It fascinated him. He was conscious of a boyish desire to wriggle straddle-legged along it to where it vanished in the shadows.

"How could you get up to it?" he asked.

"Pouf! I've been along it often," scoffed Maisie. "There was a family of robins had their home up there, and I tamed one for Sunshine. Then a cat ate it, and Mrs. Fancy gave her that owl. Did you see his cage? He's called Mr. Brown, and he's a horrid creature, and eats sparrows."

"Who's Mrs. Fancy?" asked Johnnie.

"Mrs. Fancy? She takes care of Sunshine. Great care." Maisie's eyes twinkled, and she remarked oracularly, "If Mrs. Fancy falls in love with you, then you'll be quite all right."

"Well, I want to come back," said Johnnie.

Maisie picked up the thread of conversation where it had been broken when Johnnie began to ask questions.

She waved her hand round comprehensively.

"There's not a single line of anything straight. It's a dear place, isn't it?"

"There's a tree built into the wall," said Johnnie.

"The squatters built their huts round the trees," said Maisie. "It saved taking them out, and they made nice strong posts. There is another by the window with a donkey-shoe hanging to a nail in it. I've always wanted to have that little shoe; but it's too high, I can't reach it."

Johnnie stretched up an arm and unfastened the shoe. Maisie seated herself in the embrasure of the window shelf and watched him. The shelf was broad and deep, and raised just a sufficient height above the ground to make sitting on it comfortable. Johnnie brushed the cobwebs from the shoe, and then sat down beside her. Maisie had tucked herself into the corner of the window, and the back of her head was leaning against the broken lattice where the sunbeams were playing games of hide and seek with her hair. It was crisp, rippling hair, and seemed to catch the light and hold its sparkle.

Johnnie laid the shoe on her lap.

"I wonder how old it is," he said.

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Maisie turned the shoe over and counted the nail holes. She answered irrelevantly :

"There's no luck in a donkey's shoe. You might just as well expect luck if you hung up the heel of a man's boot."

Johnnie was sitting with his legs crossed, and the foot nearest Maisie was tilted upwards. With a movement as light and quick as a kitten's, she bent forward, and the next moment the rusty little shoe was hanging to Johnnie's heel. "It just fits," she said mockingly.

Johnnie sat quite still and looked at her. "I'm not going to rise to that. It can just hang there till you take it off," he said. The tired straw was beginning to wake up. Maisie curled herself back into her corner well pleased.

"You were asking how old it was," she remarked sweetly. "It must be ages since a donkey lived here. I always call this place the old donkey stable because of that shoe. I expect that, when the squatter enlarged his holding, he gave this over to the geese and the donkey. Do you know anything about squatters?" she asked.

"No," said Johnnie. He was feeling, very cautiously, for his cigarette case. He was determined that no movement on his part would dislodge that piece of impertinence which she had hung on to his heel.

Maisie divined his intention.

"You mustn't smoke here," she said. "It's dangerous."

"Dangerous!" Johnnie stared.

"This place is just like a tinder box." Maisie pointed to the wood shavings and wisps of straw lying about at their feet. "I know what you would do! I saw all those matches and cigarette ends you had strewed round you out there by the fence. If you did that in here, there would be a nice blaze."

Johnnie would have liked to flout her objection. He murmured "Silly rot" under his breath, but he dared not move or the donkey shoe would tumble off! He folded his arms and frowned at his boot. She had touched him on a vital point. The soothing sensation of even striking a match was denied to him. He took refuge in dignified silence.

But neither the silence nor the dignity made any impression upon Maisie.

"I'll explain to you about the squatters," she said graciously. "In olden days these great commons were more or less free lands—at least, no one troubled much about what went on. They were so over-grown with gorse that you couldn't get about, and there were no roads. They were splendid places for hiding. If a runaway thief, or someone who wanted to be

lost, got into cover, he was quite safe until the hunt was over. He just squatted down under a gorse bush, and lived on what he could poach. That's how he began to be a squatter."

Maisie was proud of her knowledge of local lore. If not strictly accurate she was always picturesque.

"By degrees," she went on, "he made his hut a little bigger, and took in more ground, and perhaps stole some chickens and a pig and became respectable."

"Were they all bad lots?" asked Johnnie, who was becoming interested in spite of his ruffled feelings.

"Well, they all had to have a beginning," said Maisie airily. "In time they became their own landlords. If a squatter could prove that he had lived for so many years on that one particular bit of ground, and no one had tried to turn him off, it was his. He could do what he liked with it, or he could sell it by what they call a key-hole right here. Whoever bought it paid so much for the door key, and it was his." "That holds good still," she added.

"Was this place bought like that?" asked Johnnie. "Does it belong to Miss Sunshine?"

"No, it——" Maisie caught herself up.

"It belongs," she presently said, "to the lord of the Manor. A lot of these old cottages

were bought in to save them from tumbling to pieces. Of course this one has been glorified since."

"Who's he, the lord of the Manor?" asked Johnnie.

"Squire Yorke," said Maisie; and Johnnie wondered why she seemed to be laughing at nothing.

She slid off the window-seat and stood up.

"We haven't started to find the wood to mend the fence with yet," she said. "It's taken such a long time to explain things to you."

She spoke as though Johnnie were to blame, and not she. But Johnnie did not move. He looked at the donkey-shoe. It still hung where Maisie had placed it.

"Why don't you kick it off?" she said; and then she gave the thing a flick, and it fell with a tinkling clatter on to the floor.

Johnnie picked up the shoe and put it in his pocket.

"It's mine," protested Maisie.

"It's in my pocket," said Johnnie.

He rose as he spoke. "Shall we start on the fence now? I'm quite ready."

Maisie made a grimace behind his back, as they moved over towards a quantity of wood that was stacked against the wall. There was no doubt that the tired straw was beginning to wake up.

## CHAPTER IV.

### SUNSHINE WHISPERS TO THE STARS.

PULLING down the wood-stack provided an engrossing occupation. It was accompanied by a certain amount of noise, and the noise drowned all sounds except what the workers were making themselves. It was only when Johnnie and Maisie were about to emerge into the outer world again that they became aware that the vine-covered trellis was harbouring a new influx of visitors. Johnnie was carrying the wood, and Maisie was armed with a saw, and a hammer, and a bag of nails.

"Moses!" ejaculated Johnnie; and, burdened as he was, he tried to squeeze himself in behind the door.

"What's the matter?" whispered Maisie, and she squeezed herself in beside him.

Johnnie's eyes were glued to a chink which ran downwards from where the door hinges had loosened.

"Let me see too," said Maisie, pressing nearer. And through a continuation of the chink, considerably lower than Johnnie's point

of view, she caught a glimpse of the scene beyond.

"That's Ernest sitting on the tree-stump," explained Johnnie. "The other one's a German boy that Ernest has just picked up. He comes from Berlin, and gives himself beastly airs."

Johnnie's head and Maisie's were naturally very close together, and their voices were hushed to the merest whisper.

"What an odd little fright," said Maisie. "Why is he dressed like that? A yachting cap, and a ridiculous coat with brass buttons, and white trousers! He just wants a telescope and a whistle, and you can imagine him piping Boat-a-hoy!"

"Boat-a-hoy; just about it!" and Johnnie stifled a rumbling kind of laugh. "He looks about sixteen, but he's older. He's come here to learn what he calls economics. Ernest's planted him down at the place where I am. He works like blazes; I don't."

As Maisie knew all about the "place," and was a young person who grasped a situation quickly, Johnnie's snapshot explanations conveyed all there was to know.

"What shall we do?" she said. "We can't stay squashed in here. I should rather like to talk to Boat-a-hoy. He looks so funny."



Just at that moment, Johnnie allowed one of the pieces of wood he was holding to fall.

"Look out," he exclaimed, and Maisie, stepping quickly aside, stood revealed in the doorway.

Sunshine held out her hand.

"There you are," she said. "I was wondering what had become of you."

And then Johnnie was seen looming from the background behind Maisie. He was very cobwebby, and Ernest's heart rejoiced.

The little German at once rose to his feet. He looked interrogatively at his hostess, and then at Maisie, but Sunshine hesitated. She could not remember the stranger's name.

He did not give her time, however, to feel embarrassed.

He clicked his heels together, and swept off his yachting cap with a bow, so low, that it nearly doubled him in two.

"Herr Becker," he announced pompously.

"Franz," murmured Ernest, by way of furthering matters.

Franz, Herr Becker acknowledged Ernest's kindly intent by another sweeping bow; and, drawing himself up with military precision, he puffed out his chest. It required a great amount of puffing to give him a presence.

Franz, Herr Becker was not beautiful. He had a flat white face with straw-coloured hair, and his childish body was obviously overtaxed by the sense of its own importance.

Johnnie stalked solemnly on in the direction of the fence, and laid down his bundle of wood. He expected that Maisie would follow him with the tools; but Maisie did not hurry. She smiled on Franz, Herr Becker, and offering him the saw, playfully jingled her bag of nails.

"You would like to come and help, wouldn't you?" she said.

Franz accepted the saw rapturously. He was as susceptible to female charms as the combustibleness of a Guy Fawkes squib.

He gave another of his expansive bows.

"With much pleasure," he announced; and Maisie gave him the hammer to carry as well.

Johnnie received the new recruit with lowering brows, which did not clear when the little German proceeded to take command of the situation. He propounded his views with the authoritative confidence of one who knew what he was talking about. That was the annoying part of it. He knew how to mend a fence, and he knew that he knew.

"Blooming know-all," growled Johnnie. And Maisie, overhearing the growl, said quite out loud, and very unfeelingly Johnnie thought :

"Now, we really shall get on. Such a lot of time has been wasted."

Ernest turned his back to the scene of action.

"There'll be 'wigs on the green' ere long," he remarked. "A new element has been introduced into the plot. Who is the young lady? She seems to be more than usually endowed with that mysterious quality which provoked unpleasantness in the Garden of Eden."

"I suppose you hold me responsible," said Sunshine.

"Every shepherd shepherds his own sheep," answered Ernest.

"Maisie is all right. She—well, I think she likes to amuse herself; but she's had an odd kind of bringing up. She's an only child, and she has been allowed pretty much to bring herself up. She has always had her own way, and now, a little less than a year ago, her father quite unexpectedly provided her with a step-mother!"

"Dear, dear," said Ernest. "And the arrangement is not turning out a success?"

"It is one of those inexplicable cases that nothing can explain," said Sunshine. "I mean why the Squire married in the way he did. I think it must have been the impulse of a sudden panic. He woke up to realise that Maisie was no longer a child, and he took the first means

that came into his head to put the responsibility of her on some one else. Of course she resents the situation bitterly."

"Poor soul," murmured Ernest. "I mean the stepmother."

"Mrs. Yorke is one of those monotonous women, who are always immersed in some scheme, or faddist theory; but there's a kind of emptiness about her schemes," said Sunshine. "She's painfully in earnest, and yet curiously negative."

"Poor soul," repeated Ernest, with deep commiseration. "The kind of life that winds up with an apology for something it hasn't done. Strangely pathetic isn't it?"

Sunshine was silent for a moment, and then she said:

"Thank you for that nice little snub."

Ernest looked distressed. "Snub!" he echoed. "I did not mean to snub."

"No, I know you did not. I was criticising Mrs. Yorke in the light of a huge mistake. You saw the pathos. It must be just as trying for her. You could not put down three people to live together whose temperaments are more widely different."

"Ah, temperament! That's the crux," said Ernest. "We can fight out our character and our reputation, but our temperament! It

matters most, and humanly speaking, it's what we're least responsible for. One is tempted to question the distribution of gifts—why one, for example, should be given a temperament all fire and action, and a spirit fit to storm the world; and another, just enough vitality to dribble through life like a sluggish stream between sticky banks.”

Sunshine smiled at Ernest's whimsicality. It was a whimsicality which held no cynicism. She felt that she could confess her sins to such an one as Ernest.

“How seldom any allowance is made for temperament, and what isn't just one's own point of view,” she said. “Something we don't try to understand rubs up against a little personal fastidiousness, and we criticise on that.”

“Well, criticism isn't a particularly healthy sentiment to encourage unless you're out to make use of it,” admitted Ernest frankly. “It's tepid comfort you get from the folk who pick holes they don't know how to mend.”

A very kindly tenderness came into his eyes.

“We're not talking personally, of course. We'll call your view studying character. There certainly is a form of domestic criticism which is exceedingly paralysing. Perhaps it's that which makes Mrs. Yorke so negative. It tends

to a fizzling out of enthusiasm. It accounts for a lot of failures."

Sunshine pondered over his words.

"How much wasted effort there seems to be in the world!" She spoke half to herself, it seemed.

"Nothing is wasted," remonstrated Ernest.

She answered him with a little shake of her head.

"If your life has to be just nothing? The years are empty of results. They pass, and are lost."

"Nay verily, not lost," said Ernest. "We have that most stimulating of promises that we can redeem the time. We can release a prisoned past by making use of it."

Sunshine persisted.

"What is there to release from what has been just a looking on?"

"Well, the looking on must have had a meaning, and every meaning has a resultant use. Nothing is wasted," reiterated Ernest. "The heart-broken cry of a failure may stir a slumberer into action. The complacent trot of a woolly-booted philanthropist may be quickened to the charge of a cavalry brigade by——. I once knew a man whose whole scheme of philanthropy was turned upside down by seeing a woman crying over a dead baby under a

lamp-post. He had been quite content to pin price-tickets on to bazaar flannel petticoats until then. He's a lifebuoy for human wrecks now."

Sunshine looked down at her hands.

"I wonder if I could even make bazaar flannel petticoats" she said. She was curiously interested. To question Ernest was to open a door to the unexpected. "My hands! They mostly have to lie—like that—and do nothing; at least, nothing that you would count."

"That I would count! Why make me a judge?" A faint tremor shook Ernest's voice. "Ah, you women, with your fragile hands, and your soft voices, and the subtlety of your femininity. In your sweet helplessness, you think yourselves of little count, because you cannot follow us into the whirl of life. You hold the best of us, if you only knew."

"Helplessness?" questioned Sunshine. Her voice sounded very wistful.

"The values of life are deepened a thousand fold to those who must needs look through other eyes, and crave the ministry of other hands," said Ernest softly. And there fell again, as there had fallen once before, one of those odd silences which are so fruitful of understanding.

The sound of upraised voices came from the other side of the fence; and Sunshine sighed a

little, for the spell was broken. Ernest turned the conversation into a lighter vein.

"Did you notice Johnnie's cobwebby appearance when he emerged from that blue door?" he asked. "What are you going to set him on to next? I'm sure you've got unlimited resources; don't keep them all inside the fence."

"There was a hole made in the fence this afternoon," said Sunshine.

"The thin end of the wedge," suggested Ernest.

He twisted himself round on the tree-stump to see what was going on behind him. He dropped his half bantering tone.

"It's time to take these children away," he said, and he rose to his feet. "No, don't worry to have them in here to say good-bye. I expect you've had enough of their chattering. And — Oh, dear! Here comes Mrs. Fancy. What will she say to this crowd?"

Mrs. Fancy, carrying her basket of eggs, was seen panting up the little incline towards the gate. Her astonished eyes were fixed on Franz, who was putting the finishing touches to the fence.

"I must throw myself into the breach," said Ernest hurriedly. "Good-bye. I hope we shall be allowed to come back again"; and he took his departure in haste.



Long after the twilight had faded into the warm dusk of the summer night, Sunshine lay and watched the stars come out one by one, until the sky was like a jewelled canopy above her head. And as the lesser stars clustered in tiny points of light round the bigger stars, so, round one central thought in her brain, the dawn of an awakened hope revolved unceasingly.

“My helplessness; to make use of it!” she murmured more than once.

The dim outline of her couch showed faint and ghost-like, and that which lay on it was so still. Still with the stillness of helplessness, not of strength in repose.

“Can these years, which I have thought useless, have had a meaning?” she whispered to the stars.

She had often whispered to the stars before. Pleaded in sore distress of pain for sleep, for unconsciousness, for even a brief respite from tortured nerves and the weariness of chained limbs. But the stars had never answered before. To-night they whispered back a curious message of knowledge and understanding.

“We are only stars, but we have been helping you to learn a lesson,” they said. “We are not called to be restless and over busy. We are called to be bright and faithful; each in our

own little sphere shining our bravest. Our twinkling lights have been helping you to read from a sealed book, which is open only to sleepless eyes. The mysteries of the night are the symbols of the unknown; they call for revelation. They tell you that the pulse of nature is God's omnipresence, and that your little speck of being has its place and use and purpose in His eyes. That the resistless force which bears you onwards, with your burden of dumb yearning is not a futile drifting through tideless waters, but the flood of a great Love whose bourne is the shores of the Infinite. That is what we have been trying to teach you."

\*   \*   \*   \*   \*

But the stars told no more that night. They had comforted as they had never comforted before, and that sufficed. They had opened the door to understanding. They had shone on a new meaning, and a new star, which was the star of hope, now twinkled in their midst.

## CHAPTER V.

### WITHIN SIGHT OF THE MANOR.

THE pacifying of Mrs. Fancy, and the explanation which was necessary to account for all that had taken place in her absence, occupied some little time; and while Ernest was thus engaged, Maisie and Johnnie and Franz wandered off on to the common. When Ernest came to look for them they were not to be found anywhere, so he decided to take his homeward way alone.

Maisie knew every path on the common, and the desultory wandering of the trio was guided as she chose to lead. Johnnie was the silent member of the party. Franz talked, and asked questions incessantly, and his curiosity inspired in Maisie a spirit of impishness. His insatiable thirst for acquiring and docketing knowledge stimulated her imagination, at no time lacking; and, as he literalised every absurdity which fell from her lips, the confusion in his brain must have been wonderful.

Before long they had left behind them the open freedom of the common, and were passing through the sylvan tract of country traversed

by Ernest and the old chestnut the morning before. They came to the stile under the lime-tree, where the right-of-way path skirted the hedgerow, and here their homeward routes should have separated. But Maisie sat down on the top of the stile, and Johnnie seated himself on one side of her and Franz on the other. Stiles have a natural affinity with youth. Does anything young ever pass a stile without wishing to sit on it, or withhold a backward glance of lingering regret after it is past? These three were all very young, in spite of the little ephemeral crusts with which sensitive youth seeks to protect its crudities.

The shadows were beginning to lengthen, and the flute of a blackbird sounded from the topmost bough of the lime tree. Beyond the paddock, which skirted the path, a deer fence marked the boundary line of a finely timbered park, and the eye was carried onwards to a point where a glimpse of grey buttressed walls gave token of a stately dwelling half hidden amongst the foliage of the summer green.

Maisie had fallen suddenly silent. The peaceful beauty of the passing day was soothing, and to Johnnie it also appealed. He was content to remain silent, but Franz seized the opportunity to monopolise the conversation. He had been panting breathlessly in the wake

of Maisie's vagaries; here was a chance of being able to take the lead. His self-importance invariably found expression in the imparting of knowledge. His little red-tape mind was stored with tabulated forms of instruction, which could be pounced upon at a moment's notice for active demonstration.

"Our feets is all alike," he announced, drawing attention to the three pairs of feet resting on the lower step of the stile. Johnnie had found some difficulty in arranging his legs on that particular step. By hugging his knees to his chin he had succeeded in doing so.

Maisie leant forward.

"They're not," she protested. "At least mine are not in the least like yours."

Franz thrust out his feet, shod in badly cut square-toed shoes, which allowed for a wide interregnum of white cotton sock between them and the hem of his trousers.

"Dainty ducks, aint they?" murmured Johnnie.

"My feets and your feets is alike," persisted Franz didactically. "It is because you do not know the meanings of the German words, *gleich* and *ainlich*, that you do not perceive that I am right and you are wrong. I will explain to you that——"

"Oh, shut up! We don't want a German lesson," grumbled Johnnie.

But Franz would not be suppressed. He had learnt by experience that a talker who wishes to keep his lead must be blind and deaf to interruption. He raised his voice:

"But, yes! It will please me to explain the difference between these two words of *gleich* and *ainlich*, which means like and alike. Your feets and mine is like, because my two feets is alike to each other, and your two feets is alike to each other; therefore my feets is like to yours!"

A dead silence followed until Maisie whispered to Johnnie: "He's proved it, you know."

"Wants his head punched; shall I do it?" was Johnnie's response.

The idea of punching Franz's head, and being whispered to confidentially by Maisie gave a pleasant thrill.

Maisie's eyes were brimming over with mischief.

"Not just yet." She smiled on the triumphant Franz.

"How cleverly you explain things!" she said. "You ought to write a book on explanations. Perhaps you have?"

Franz beamed, but his elation was promptly

squashed by Johnnie, who leant across and said warningly :

“ Look out ! She’s pulling your leg.”

The effect of this warning was startling. The little German’s eyes flashed, and his child-like body bristled into a thing of wrath.

“ I find you a most immodest gentleman to say such words,” he exclaimed. “ The Fraulein has not touched one of my limbs.”

Johnnie collapsed, and Maisie looked straight in front of her. Franz jerked his head backwards and forwards, like an angry game-cock, trying to get a better view of Johnnie.

“ You have insulted the Fraulein by such words,” he cried. “ You are not a gentleman. I have no more use to make of your acquaintance.”

Maisie intervened. She indicated Johnnie with a wave of her hand.

“ He did not intend anything insulting. He was only——” She frowned and hesitated. How could she explain to anyone so absolutely devoid of humour the subtlety of the situation?

“ It—It’s just an expression ; a kind of thing that’s meant to be taken as a joke,” she said at length.

The wrath of Franz, Herr Becker evaporated like a pricked bubble. The inexorableness of habit seized hold of him. Here was a thing to

be noted, labelled, and packed away in a mental dispatch box for future use.

He hurriedly produced a note-book, and began scribbling.

"To pull the leg—is an English joke," Maisie heard him murmuring. Then he put the end of his pencil into his mouth and sucked it thoughtfully.

"What funny things you seem to have in that book," remarked Maisie. "What's that? It looks like the sketch of an old castle, or fort."

Franz began to turn over the leaves of his note-book.

"Wherever I goes, I makes reflections of what I sees," he explained. "Out of a carriage window, or voyaging in a boat, or when, like this, I view a new country. It may be that such things come of use."

He pointed across the paddock to where, through the trees of the park, the house with the grey gables could be seen faintly outlined.

"You, who are on the land grown, can you inform me to whom belongs that schloss?" he demanded.

"My father," said Maisie. "That's my home."

"So!"

Franz's eyes grew round and interested.

"It is a large house. In England you have



large houses. Do you enlarge your houses as your families increase? How many times has your family increased?"

Maisie laughed, but Johnnie voiced his displeasure audibly.

"Inquisitive little bounder. What business has he to ask questions like that? He'll put down everything you tell him in that note-book. That's what he does. Look! He's drawing a sketch of the house now."

All the time Franz had been asking questions he had been busy with his pencil. He worked with skill and rapidity, and Maisie watched him.

"He's doing it very well," she said.

There was no doubt that Franz knew the technicalities of his art. Clear and sharp, with an admirable sense of perspective, he had made a really clever representation of the scene before him.

"You must have a large family to occupy such a big schloss," he remarked, as he touched in with a succession of dots the outline of a stack of chimneys. "How many brothers and sisters have you got?"

"I haven't got any," said Maisie.

"Ah, so!" Franz was now busy scribbling down footnotes to his sketch in a mysterious code of crabbed German lettering. "I also am

the only child of my parents," he continued garrulously. "It might have been that there was a large family; but some came before they was ready, and others went away too soon. When I am three more years of age I will marry. Can I get a cheap wife in England?"

"How much would you give for her?" asked Maisie.

Franz glanced up in her face.

"Would you marry with a gentleman who drinks beer?" he asked anxiously.

"Look here, Becker!" interrupted Johnnie, "you're making a silly ass of yourself, and I'm going to take you away. Come on!"

Johnnie slipped his feet from the step and stood up. Perhaps it was time to take himself away as well as Franz. Maisie had not expressed any wish for either of them to escort her further. It was possible that she had sat down on the stile in order to get rid of them.

"You're quite near home, you're all right," he said, desirous that Maisie should understand he quite realised the situation.

"I'm all right, thank you," answered Maisie. Then she laughed a little, and added: "I don't believe Sunshine ever told you who I was. I'm Maisie Yorke."

The laugh, and the look she flashed up at him brought back to Johnnie the episode of the

donkey-shoe and Maisie's tales of the squatter's cottage.

So she was Squire Yorke's daughter! And that house opposite was the Manor, and all these lands belonged to it. He liked the feeling that she was identified with something so intimate and abiding. He wanted to meet her again; and then he remembered the donkey-shoe in his pocket. He was glad he had kept it.

Franz had also descended from the stile, and stood at attention with his heels clicked together.

"Good-bye," said Maisie; and she held out her hand to each of the two in succession.

To Johnnie, shaking hands was an ordinary conventionality; to Franz, it was quite as ordinary a conventionality to kiss the hand over which he bowed. Johnnie regarded Franz's action with marked disapproval. He walked off in silence, leaving Franz to trot after him.

Maisie made a grimace, and, taking out her pocket-handkerchief, rubbed the back of her hand. Her eyes followed the two figures disappearing in the distance.

"What a funny pair they make!" was her thought. "I wonder if I shall ever see them again."

The chiming of a clock fell on her ears. It was the same clock as had chimed for Ernest,

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and the sound came from the direction of the house opposite, where a belfry tower showed its domed roof above the trees. With a sigh of regret she left the stile behind her; and, striking across the paddock, passed through one of the park gates into the softly subdued light of a grassy glade beyond.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE SQUIRE'S DILEMMAS.

WIDE shallow steps led up to a stone-flagged terrace which ran the entire length of the south-western side of the Manor; and Maisie mounted the steps slowly. They were grey and age-worn; microscopic little plants lived in sunny crevices, and delicately-hued lichens crept lovingly about the curved base of the balustrade.

Franz had been aptly near the truth when he had drawn attention to the fact that such types of houses as the Manor were enlarged according as the families in them increased. Like the squatter's hut on the common, the Manor had been fashioned and refashioned to suit the tastes and requirements of successive generations as they had sprung into existence. What had once been the hall, was now the smoking-room, gun-room, and general sanctum of the master of the house. He had appropriated it because it opened conveniently on to the terrace. It commanded a sunny view of the gardens and the park, and of the distant woodlands. It was

equally well-placed for boots fresh from the stubbles, or splashed hunting-clothes. Depriving the house of its legitimate front door did not trouble the Squire at all; but as an entrance, of some sort was necessary for the general household, he had caused to have erected, over an unused door somewhere in the background, a monstrosity, which looked like a Black Maria turned upside down, and which bore no possible resemblance to a porch. Such as it was, however, it remained; and as the Squire never made use of it himself, its inappropriateness did not disturb his peace of mind.

Maisie had to pass the doors of what had once been the hall, and was now her father's complex arrangement of private territory. As the doors were double doors, high and arched above, and stood wide open, she heard the familiar tones of her father's voice uplifted from within. As her shadow darkened the doorway her name was shouted, and she stepped from the brilliance of the flood of low-lying sunshine without, into a dimness which seemed almost twilight.

"Well!" she said enquiringly. She knew by the shout which had summoned her that something had occurred to upset the paternal equanimity. Her father was standing in the middle of the polished floor. Carpets were an abomination to him, and the bare boards were

black with age except where the characteristic habits of its occupant had worn little track marks over the wood. The shouting continued. The Squire was a sturdy well set-up little man, reddish in colouring, and at that particular moment his face was very red indeed. About his feet was strewn a litter of paper and string and packing wrappers, and he was holding in one hand what looked like a wire hat, and in the other an object resembling a basket-bath on the end of a walking-stick.

"Well!" repeated Maisie, from whose eyes the sun dazzle had barely faded. She stooped and picked up a label.

"It's addressed to you from the Army and Navy Stores. Have they sent a wrong order?"

At that moment a door opened behind the Squire, and Mrs. Yorke entered. She came forward as though feeling her way over dangerous ice. She was a tall loosely put-together woman, and wore curious garments, curious, and yet characterless. Her eyes were prominent, but they were the least expressive features in her face. They were simply balls of blue and white, as clear and void of atmosphere as a Swiss landscape. She was one of those hapless women who have no vanity, that most useful of feminine attributes. She invari-

ably came down to breakfast in her hat, and kept it on all day.

The Squire turned with a jerk, and held out the wire hat and the basket-bath.

"What fool has sent me these?" he demanded.

"Oh, they've come," said Mrs. Yorke. "Yes, of course, the store number is in your name. I ordered them from an illustrated catalogue. One is a cinder-sifter, and the other is a flower-gathering pole. Rose leaves and cinder ash," she murmured. "It's a recipe for chilblains. But is that all?" She looked down at the packing papers. "There ought to be an east-wind draught-protector, and a set of dishes for preparing uncooked luncheons. I hoped to commence the course of uncooked food to-morrow."

The Squire allowed the cinder-sifter and the flower-gathering pole to drop with a clatter. He walked over to the fireplace and stood with his back to the empty grate. A portrait of a rubicund-faced ancestor, who bore a rakish air of general good-living, hung on the wall opposite, and he stared at it gloomily.

"An east-wind draught-protector with the thermometer at seventy-five in the shade, and raw meat for lunch! I have to go up to town



to-morrow by the morning express," he said, raising his voice.

Mrs. Yorke had followed him across the room, still feeling her way cautiously. She was as antagonistic to slippery boards as was the Squire to carpets. Not that she approved of carpets; they harboured microbes. But slippery boards were almost as dangerous as microbes, and it was with reference to this particular subject that she had wished to speak when she entered the room. The Squire edged away as she approached. His wife had yet to learn that he disliked being followed. He had various little vantage grounds of possession which were his by hereditary right, and he preferred to bark from a distance rather than be conversed with at close quarters.

"I have found such a good idea in this little pamphlet," began Mrs. Yorke, detaching a paper from a bundle which she was holding in her hand. "It's a paper called *Crumbs for the House Sparrow*, and has a *Good Idea* suggestion for every day of the week. If you are going up to town to-morrow you could bring the required material back with you. It's about the staircase! Of course, personally, I consider that it ought to be laid down with the new germ-destroying matting; but as you say you prefer it in its present uncovered condition,

to-day's *Good Idea* suggests an alternative until we can make further arrangements."

She read out from the pamphlet in her hand :

"A small piece of white American oil-cloth, placed at the foot of a dark flight of steps, will warn those who are descending that the last step is reached, and prevent an unpleasant jar to the system."

Her eyes were fixed on the paper, and she did not see the expression on her husband's face.

"It's quite simple," she said. "A few nails would——"

Maisie who had been a silent witness of the scene, and to whom the thunder-cloud gathering on her father's brow was eloquently significant of what would be the fate of the "Good Idea" the moment he opened his mouth to speak, turned and fled through the open door on to the terrace, and re-entered the house by another way. As she passed up the beautiful old oak staircase, she stooped down and laid her hand caressingly on the cool surface of one of the steps.

"Dear, darling old steps," she murmured. "To think of covering you up! How stuffy and dull you would feel! You would never know what I was doing, and you would never be able to give me back my own reflection as

you have done ever since I was a baby thing in socks and frocks. Do you remember the day I wore my blue kid shoes for the first time, and I was so busy admiring them that I tumbled down, and you bumped my head for me so that I shouldn't do it again? My habit has dribbled wet and mud on you often, and you never minded, and I want you to see me in my birthday ball frock. You shall—even if I have to undress you myself for it."

She mounted a few more steps, and then paused opposite a square of paper pinned to the panelling of the wainscot. It was one of Mrs. Yorke's danger signals; a warning of some hidden peril.

"Every corner of the house will soon be placarded over with these horrible things, advertisements of ridiculous rubbish that make one feel microby even to look at them," she exclaimed.

With a shrug of her shoulders she continued her way until she reached her own room. She closed the door behind her, and crossing to the window seated herself in the cushioned recess. A white jessamine clambered about the window ledge, and she began idly to break off some sprays. Sounds rose easily from the terrace below, and she could hear her father's voice still shouting. She laughed a little contemptuously.

She had not run away from the scene below out of any sense of fear. She was not in the least afraid of her father, because she understood him perfectly. If she had chosen, she could have dispersed with little difficulty the storm that was now raging. Her father was as easy to read as an open book, and with unerring instinct she knew just how much importance was to be attached to these explosive outbursts, and how to avoid or circumvent them. On this occasion, if asked why she had not intervened to quell the disturbance, she would have answered that she was not in the least sorry for her father. If his wife rubbed him up the wrong way and made him uncomfortable, it was his own fault. Why had he married her? There was no one to blame but himself. The annoying part of it was that the uncomfortable-ness did not end with him.

"It's a muddle for everything and everybody," she exclaimed, apostrophising the jessamine hotly. "Why did he do it? As if marrying that fool of a woman would save him the trouble of looking after me! I don't want looking after. I can take care of myself—I always have done so, and I always shall."

She took stock of the room and her surroundings critically. It had been her nursery: it had mirrored the years of her young life from baby-

hood to the emancipation of the present day. From the old brass fire-guard which encircled the hearth, to the countless tokens denoting her tastes and habits, it was all a reflection of what exclusively characterised herself. She had developed herself on her own lines; she had never been trained to account for a thought, word, or action. She had never looked to any guide except her own inclinations.

She threw the spray of jessamine from her. How boring it all was! She was conscious of no wish to make matters better; it was no business of hers even to try.

"They must worry it out for themselves. I can't help—and I won't"; and she rose, and, taking off her hat, tossed it impatiently aside, and prepared to dress for dinner.

## CHAPTER VII.

### AN ORDER OF RELEASE.

WHEN Ernest Muspratt paid his next visit to the thatched cottage, the twilight was beginning to fall. A grey mist lay along the low horizon line, and the shadows were creeping ghost-like over the silent land.

Not being quite sure whether the lady of the cottage chose to receive visitors at that unconventional hour, and as he was again riding the old chestnut, he made his way towards a window from which a light streamed, giving a shrewd guess that Mrs. Fancy lit her kitchen lamp early. He urged the chestnut into the radius of light.

"If she sees your brown nose, it will draw her like a magnet," he said persuasively, "and you know what that means. Carrots and sugar. Ah! I thought so."

A bustling sound was heard from within, and Mrs. Fancy's head was thrust out of the uncurtained window.

"Dear 'art alive!" she exclaimed. "If it ain't that love of an old 'orse back again." She

noddod to Ernest. "You wait there. I'll be round in two skips of a flea." And Ernest had barely time to slip from the saddle, when Mrs. Fancy appeared with her apron gathered up in her hand and bulging after a manner which was plainly understood by the chestnut, who buried his nose in it and a soft crunching sound followed.

Mrs. Fancy smiled delightedly.

"'E knows, 'e does, don't 'e? My father allus used to say as young carrots was more easy to domesticate nor oats for an old 'orse."

"Is it too late to pay a visit to your lady?" asked Ernest.

Mrs. Fancy pursed up her mouth with a dubious air. She was running her fingers up and down the chestnut's velvety nose, and giving him little tickly caresses, which he tolerated for the sake of the carrots.

"She'd say she'd see you, right enough. But I'm not sure as I'm doin' my dooty in allowin' of all this racketin' in and out."

"Racketing!" expostulated Ernest. "Come now, Mrs. Fancy! I'm not a racketeer, am I?"

"Well, no you ain't," admitted Mrs. Fancy. "You ain't been here for more nor a week. It's them young folks. In and out most days, they've been. It all began with the breakin' of that there old fence an' the mendin' of it."

"No, it didn't," corrected Ernest gently. "It began with you Mrs. Fancy. You tempted me to stay that first morning with a cup of tea; and it was all because you had lost your heart to this old horse. That began it."

Mrs. Fancy laughed. "Well, if you will 'ave it so, it was! I never could resist a bit o' 'orseflesh—specially a well bred un'. That comes o' bein' born and bred of a 'orsy lot. My father was in a racin' stable. A spry little man as thin as a match splint, though you wouldn't think it to look at me! When folks asked 'ow 'e kepted down his weight, he used to say: 'My bones is too proud to carry flesh.' 'E did put on a bit as 'e grew older; but he was never what you would call porky."

"How interesting!" said Ernest.

"Yes, 'e was with my little lady's father who kepted a racin' stud as there weren't the like of nowhere." Mrs. Fancy waxed eloquent. "A fine sportin' gentleman, allus with a sovereign in 'is 'and an' a 'ole in his pocket. But there! 'E lost every blessed penny, an' broke 'is neck in a coachin' accident, and—and smashed 'er up."

Mrs. Fancy's voice faltered. "'Er—you know? Miss Sunshine, as I calls 'er."

"How very distressing!" said Ernest sympathetically.



"When I sits down to go back on what's been, and gone, it seems like I must be dreaming," continued Mrs. Fancy. "My! you wouldn't think it, to see 'er lyin' there so quiet and still, with nothin' but a thatched roof over 'er 'ead, and a mossel of a garden as two spoons would cover, wot gay doings she was brought up to. Such parties, an' balls, an' race meet-ins, an' she the kind to turn 'eads crazy without so much as liftin' a finger. Many a 'art has ached under a pink 'untin' coat for my little lady. I could tell you——"

"I know—I quite understand," interposed Ernest, to whom life's tragedies were as things sacred, and who honoured the sanctity of reserve with a chivalry which would fain protect it from the garrulous and inquisitive alike.

"I quite understand," he repeated, and returning to the accusation which had been cast at him, he added: "You know Mrs. Fancy, we are not really racketers, we want to be kind to your little lady. Don't draw the line at the fence too tight. Perhaps it might do her good to see us!"

To his utter consternation, Mrs. Fancy laid her head against the chestnut's shoulder and burst into tears. Not knowing the cause of this sudden abandonment, and feeling rather

helpless, Ernest offered his pocket-handker—as the only comfort he could think of. Mrs. Fancy obviously had not one of her own, and as her apron was full of carrots it was useless for the purpose of tears.

“Don’t go for sayin’ that I’m not doing my best by ’er,” she sobbed. “Me that’s nursed her days in and nights out. It could be counted in miles ’ow I’ve carried ’er in my arms. An’ though she’d never ask me to sit up o’ nights, nor never a fretty face on her, I knows—wot I knows.”

“I quite realise it all,” protested Ernest, who was vexed beyond measure, for having given cause for this heartrending reproach.

Mrs. Fancy dried her eyes. “Well, it’s like this. I’m only a’ ignorant old woman. Lookin’ after stable-men, an’ messin’ about with bran mashes, and gruel, an’ doctorin’ ’orses, don’t teach you fine ways of thinkin’. But there I loved ’er, and it seemed as if it was meant for me to take care of ’er. Everything swept away at a twinkle; an’ my man gone, an’ she as ’elpless as a baby. It was just ’avin’ to make the most of nothin’.”

She folded up the pocket-handkerchief into a damp square, and returned it to Ernest. It had eased her mind to cry, and she felt better.

“We picks along,” she remarked cheerfully.

"When I sees peeps of betterness, I could just sing for joy, and then the next minute I takes a scare in case folks might worrit 'er, and that I'm to blame."

Ernest found food for meditation. Was this lump of human goodness the best possible person to be entrusted with absolute authority in a case of this kind? He doubted it. Mrs. Fancy was a dear. He loved her as such, but she was an impulsive sentimentalist. That had been proved on the first morning of his acquaintance with her. But sentimentality had its use, like everything else; and at present it was to render Mrs. Fancy blissfully happy, crooning endearments over the object of her affections, and thus leave him free to decide his own course of action.

"I should not be surprised to find her in the saddle when I come back," he said to himself, as he made his way round by the blackthorn hedge to the front of the cottage. Mrs. Fancy had not even turned her head to ask him where he was going.

Sunshine was lying very still. Only a clear-visioned student of human nature understands the full significance of stillness as exemplified in those chosen ones who are called to suffer. There are so many kinds of stillness. There is compulsion to the inexorable. It is not

resignation; it is simply a grinding down of the physical forces to submission. There is the stillness of a finely tempered courage, steeled at every point, whose elasticity of resistance is unconquerable. There is the stillness of dumb rebellion. It is only when the balance of bodily perspective is readjusted that the value of the gain or loss of the soul's travail through these dark hours can be measured. To one the experience has been a hideous nightmare of meaningless cruelty, to be thrust aside, and if possible forgotten: to another, it has been the finding of a responsiveness to the Divine touch of the Great Teacher.

Although the greeting he received was very quiet, Ernest felt glad that he had made the venture.

"It is such a heavenly evening. I thought a passing salutation might not come amiss," he explained. And then he sat down on the tree-stump and began to talk. He touched lightly on his interview with Mrs. Fancy.

"I wonder if she's found out yet that I've gone," he said. "It isn't really late. I didn't wake you, did I, or break in upon your meditation?"

Sunshine shook her head.

"No! I wasn't asleep. I was—well—yes, I was meditating—wondering rather." She

hesitated. "If one had been half asleep for years, I wonder if the waking up would be appreciated. The smallest thing would be such a responsibility. It would all be rather terrifying."

"You would start with picking up the threads of the small things, I suppose," said Ernest. "I notice that shipwrecked crews when they reach land safely always get shaved before they're photographed. It shows self-respect, even although the smugness rather takes the edge off the romance."

Ernest's manner of treating the subject appeared a trifle flippant, and it seemed rather pointless for him to remark the next moment:

"Suppose we ask Mr. Brown?"

"Why Mr. Brown?" asked Sunshine.

Ernest bent forward and peered into the gloom.

"Because this is the time when a sagacious owl ought to be waking up. Poor Mr. Brown! He's chained to his perch."

"I know," said Sunshine penitently. "He generally is let off in the evening, but Eli Blades has lost his tether."

Ernest rose.

"I really can't resist him. His eyes are on me like two bicycle lamps. I've got a piece of string in my pocket, and I could fasten it

to the bit of chain he wears, so that he couldn't go on the loose. May I?" And the desired permission was given.

Mr. Brown was a discerning owl, and evidently knew to whom he owed his release. He sidled himself and his tethered leg close up to Ernest, and fixed him with his yellow eyes.

"I am afraid I answered rather flippantly just now about that long sleep," said Ernest turning to Sunshine. "It's a very interesting subject. May I address a few confidential remarks to Mr. Brown? If you think he doesn't like them, just shut me up, will you?"

Sunshine looked puzzled for a moment, and then she understood. Ernest had his own way of answering questions.

"Mr. Brown and I shall be very pleased to listen," she said.

Ernest gave a gentle twitch to the string.

"You are a privileged bird to be allowed to wear this," he said. "The facts that you did not put it on for yourself, and that you have to wear it until the time comes for you to be let off, give you something definite to do and no responsibility. If you had your freedom you would be just like any ordinary owl, marauding about on tree tops, or blinking at the moon, or making yourself a nuisance by hooting outside the windows of nervous old ladies."

The string was given another twitch. "Have you always made yourself pleasant and companionable? Has he?" Ernest turned to Sunshine.

"All except the sparrows," admitted Sunshine.

Ernest ran his fingers along the piece of chain.

"He has tried to fly away many times. I wonder who mended his chain when he broke it?" he asked. "Mrs. Fancy?"

"Yes, Mrs. Fancy," said Sunshine.

"And Mrs. Fancy, bless her, has mended it with her apron strings."

Ernest took another roll of string out of his pocket.

"These apron-string amendments seem rather cramping. I'm going to give him as much rope as he likes, and see what he'll do with his liberty. The other morning when he blundered over the fence on to my saddle he was more or less asleep; but now he's awake."

Ernest paid out the string, keeping one end in his hand, and gently propped Mr. Brown under the chest. The bird stretched himself and pricked his horns. He dropped like a stone from the perch where he had been placed, and with ungainly haste, which was pathetically suggestive of fettered limbs, he made his way

to one particular spot by the lower boarding of the blue-green door. Ernest rose and followed.

Mr. Brown, with his head cocked, was mounting guard. A sound came from the direction of Sunshine's couch, which was unmistakable, and Ernest returned to his tree-stump.

"A mouse-hole! Went as straight for it as a blind beggar after a penny. Don't let Mrs. Fancy hear you laughing, she'll think I'm too exciting and turn me out."

"Do you know what you have made me want to do?" exclaimed Sunshine. There was a new note of eagerness in her voice. "I want to let Mr. Brown go free, and then I should like to make a bonfire of his cage, and lay the ghosts of all these poor little headless sparrows. Will you help me to do it now?"

"With pleasure," said Ernest. "There's a beautiful summer moon just preparing to rise above that belt of mist, and the stars will soon be pricking out. What a time he'll have!"

So it happened that under the pale light of the rising moon, which he had so often gazed at through the bars of his prison house, Mr. Brown was given his order of release. There were several uncertain attempts and futile wheelings, before he gained courage to trust himself to flight. When at length the freed wings had found their strength and borne him



out of the range of vision, a strange ache of loneliness fell on Sunshine's spirit. She had not been deeply attached to the bird. She had broken his chain voluntarily; to give him his freedom had not been a sacrifice. But he had shared many a vigil. Would her own chain ever be broken; was it meant to be broken?

Ernest appeared before her, holding in his hand the severed chain.

"I expect you've made Mr. Brown very happy," he said, but he slipped the chain out of sight. Perhaps he divined something of her thoughts.

"Do you think he will ever come back?" she asked.

Ernest shook his head. "He's gone to look for the ideal mouse-hole."

Sunshine gave a tired little sigh:

"Do people ever find their ideals?"

Ernest's voice saddened. He answered very simply:

"I haven't; you might. Lying there, you look through windows that I don't know how to clean." He turned aside quickly, and the next minute Sunshine heard him scraping about on the ground by the owl's cage. Presently he appeared swinging the cage by the ring which was attached to the top.

"Now for the offering up of this," he

announced. "I'll take it outside the fence on to the common, and if you watch you will see the illumination. I've stuffed as much inflammable material as I could find inside it, so it ought to make a good blaze."

Sunshine saw the shooting up of the flame against the dusk of the summer night; and then the vivid brightness gradually sunk into a glow, from which the sparks rose and drifted.

Ernest came up to the fence and looked over. "A profound success," he announced. "All the ghosts are exorcised."

"I wonder if I ought to have made you burn the cage," said Sunshine.

"You did not make me burn it; you only gave me the opportunity of doing something which I have enjoyed very much," corrected Ernest.

"Mrs. Fancy will say it was waste and destruction," said Sunshine.

Ernest waved a deprecating hand.

"Excuse my arrogance, but that's just where Mrs. Fancy would be quite wrong, and she has just confessed to me that she is 'a ignorant old woman.' No one element can destroy another. It's a case of force changing form. Who knows what that charnel house of Mr. Brown's has been turned into by now? You have not only released Mr. Brown, but you have released

captive forces from a bondage of extreme unpleasantness, and sent them to roam space in search of new fields of enterprise."

"Is the fire quite safely out?" asked Sunshine.

"I'll give it a final look as I pass," said Ernest. He took off his hat, and gazed up at the deepening beauty of the sky.

"Are you glad you let that poor captive go free?" he asked.

"Yes, I am glad he is free," said Sunshine. "But—it was not I, it was you who set him free."

## CHAPTER VIII.

### FIRE !

MAISIE Yorke was sitting on the stile in very much the same way as she had sat there once before, and Johnnie was sitting beside her. The daylight had faded into the dusk, and a summer moon at its full was riding in a cloudless sky and lighting up the scene with unusual brilliance.

There was nothing clandestine in the meeting by the stile. It had come about quite unexpectedly. Maisie had wandered there of her own accord : Johnnie frequently found occasion to pass along by the right-of-way path. He would have frankly admitted that he liked it, because it was so conveniently near the Manor. Since making Maisie's acquaintance at the thatched cottage, he had met the Squire, and been recognised by him on the grounds that he knew something of his people ; so, under no circumstances, could he be considered as a trespasser.

Maisie was wearing the light summer frock she had worn all day.

"I've had such an exhausting experience—we all have," she said by way of explanation. "Stepmama has been having a demonstration lesson for her ambulance corps. Only fancy, on this hottest of hot days. Such a fussing and rolling up of bandages and preparing every room in the house to look like an accident ward in a hospital. She has a mania for collecting freaks. You never saw such creatures as she fills the house with. To-night they all stayed to dinner. I think they were too hot to go away."

"Do you know that your shoes are soaking wet with the dew?" said Johnnie.

"I can feel they are," answered Maisie composedly. "I came through the wettest grass I could find on purpose. It was so delicious to feel anything cool." She patted the lace about her throat. "I was the victim for the demonstrations. I've been treated for every kind of break possible, and trotted about on a stretcher, and made so hot and cross I could have screamed. And then the climax came and they were asked to stay to dinner!" Maisie held up her hands. "Father announced quite out loud that he'd been avoiding them like the devil all day, and that he couldn't eat his dinner in a menagerie. Of course he had to; but it was a lively meal. He sent the soup

down to be poured over the cook, and the oddest of the freaks was put to sit next him. She's stepmama's pet lamb. She wears a wig and looks—oh, you know! The kind of thing you'd expect to cheat at croquet. I'm sure she's had a sticky past."

Johnnie did not answer, and Maisie bent to look at him. He was seated on the lower step, and she on the top of the stile.

"Why are you so solemn?" she asked. "Because I said that about father and the devil, and stepmama's pet lamb with the sticky past? You're so ridiculously prim about some things."

"Am I?" said Johnnie. And then he added rather irrelevantly, "I wish people could choose their fathers and mothers after they've found out the kind of fathers and mothers they'd like to have."

Maisie laughed. "Have you ever seen any you would choose? What would they be like?"

Johnnie pondered. After his own fashion he had a speculative mind, and speculative minds are slow to think and slow to strike.

"I wish I could talk to my father in the way I can talk to Ernest," he volunteered at length.

"I like your Ernest," said Maisie. "I like his mouth. It is so kind and clever."

"He always understands," said Johnnie. "Small things that don't seem to matter, and yet matter a lot."

"Nice people have always big minds for little things." Maisie's voice softened a little. "What put it into your head to say that about fathers and mothers?" she asked.

"I've always wanted to be cared for in a—home kind of way," said Johnnie hesitatingly.

"But you have a home. It's a beautiful home isn't it?"

Johnnie's brows contracted. "What makes a home is never there, unless in a crowd, or when there's a show on. You get everything you want and you're allowed to do just what you like so long as it doesn't mean unpleasantness for other people. No one bothers about me. If I wanted to go home I'd wire to the butler."

There was silence for a moment or two, and then Maisie said with some vehemence:

"I love to do just what I like, and when and how, without people knowing. I hate being fussed over and followed about. I'd like to have fifty times more freedom than I have now."

"You say that because you don't know what you're talking about," answered Johnnie, in a tone of such calm authority that Maisie stared at him in astonishment. "You're ever so much

freer than I am," he continued. "You can kick up inside the railings, because you know the railings are there; but once you had jumped them you wouldn't know where you were. You might get tied up to something a deal tighter than what you had left behind."

"I don't understand," said Maisie.

"I didn't expect you would." Johnnie drooped his head for a moment. When he looked up there was an expression in his eyes which Maisie had never seen there before.

"I'd give all the money that's chucked into my pockets to have a mother who cared to know whether I ever said my prayers or not," he said, and his voice was a little husky.

For the first time in her young life Maisie was conscious of something of that maternal yearning of pity, which is akin to love. Her spoken words seemed at variance with the faintly awakened instinct.

"I am such a horrid hard little thing," she said.

Johnnie did not answer. Perhaps some telepathy of intuition carried him beyond words. There was no use in contradicting her statement, because it was not true. Her voice sounded soft and pretty when she called herself a 'horrid hard little thing.' He wished she would do it again. He leant back, and hugged



up his knees to his chin. She was so nice in her present mood, and looked such a dear perched on the topmost step of the stile. He fervently hoped no one would come along the path and interrupt.

Pit pat, pit pat. The sound of someone running down by the side of the hedgerow struck on the still air.

"Boat-a-hoy!" exclaimed Maisie. "What is he calling out? Fire! I thought I smelt burning."

She rose and stood up on the step.

"What a blaze! It has caught the gorse on the common."

Johnnie felt her hand on his shoulder. In the excitement of the moment she almost shook him. "Look! Get up and see," she cried. "It must be dreadfully near Sunshine's cottage."

Johnnie roused himself and stood beside her. At the same moment Franz, Herr Becker, panted breathlessly up to the stile. He had lost his little white yachting cap, and, hot though the night was, he wore a heavy overcoat, thrown loose across his shoulders, after the custom of his country. The sleeves were dangling empty, and flapped as he ran. He paused not for explanation or comment. He was in a state of great hurry and agitated

importance; and, waving his arms in the direction of the fire, which was gaining every moment in strength, he scrambled over the stile and hurried onwards.

Maisie caught up her skirts :

"Come!" she cried quickly, and, the next moment, Johnnie was steadying her eager feet down the steps, and they were both running in the wake of the disappearing Franz, before they quite realised what they were doing.

"Oh, these stupid wet shoes, they do wobble so," gasped Maisie.

"Give me your hand," said Johnnie, and Maisie found breath to laugh, as with a quick sense of exhilaration she felt herself borne over the uneven ground by a strong young strength which was not her own. As they left the cover of the sheltering hedgerows and came out on the ridge overlooking the common, the extent of the fire broke upon them with alarming significance. Great columns and wreaths of smoke rolled in a threatening cloud before the flames, which were spreading in irregular patches along a line of densely thick gorse and scrub. The long tongues of fire, pink and red, and fiery orange, seemed to lick the very skies with their darting tips; a ruthless vagary of hungry impulse fanning them this way and that. A seeming void of space would be black one

moment, and the next a raging burst of flame would break into its very heart. Crimson blazoned on the white-washed walls of nestling cottages, and reflected from every stone and outstanding boulder.

"It's beautiful! But isn't it wicked?" whispered Maisie, under her breath.

The two had paused for a moment's respite. They were now so near that the crackling sound of the burning undergrowth and the roar of the advancing line of fire could be heard with startling distinctness. Maisie, glancing up, saw that Johnnie's eyes were alight with more than the reflection of the flames.

"It's sweeping round, straight on the cottage," he said sharply; and, catching Maisie bodily up in his arms, he swung her over a barrier of high-growing heather, and, gripping her hand again tighter than before, urged her onwards.

The air above them seemed full of the frightened fluttering of wings: the ground beneath their feet was alive with fleeing fear. A scurrying rabbit rebounded with a thud as it ran panic-stricken against Maisie's skirts. Beast and bird, and crawling things, which hide in the daytime and search for their prey by night, were harmlessly intermingled in the instinctive flight from a common danger.

The figures of men and women could be seen

moving on the outskirts of the fire; black outlines silhouetted against the fierce glow. The men were wielding long poles, and sticks, and brooms, to beat out the fire, the women with their cans and buckets making a cordon to the nearest source of water.

There was a certain generalised order in the rapidly gathering groups of workers, which told of past experiences. To some, it might mean a roofless home and the loss of their household possessions; to others, the clearing of an overgrown track of ground which the fire would set free to give wider and richer feeding for their cows; but they all worked unitedly.

A sudden blaze shot up from the side of the blackthorn hedge as Johnnie and Maisie reached it.

"The thatch on the roof will go next," exclaimed Johnnie.

"Not if they can get enough water on to it. See!" Maisie pointed. "They have a ladder and are passing up the buckets. Thatch turns fire, if you can make it wet enough."

She pointed again. "Oh, do look! Boat-a-hoy's on the roof already. He really is rather a little brick, and he's so small that he'll be able to get about ever so much easier than these big men."

A cat-like figure could be seen crouching

above one of the rounded eaves on the roof, and Franz's white face was illumined in a halo of brilliance, as he stretched out to clutch the handle of a bucket which was handed up to him.

Along the edge of the thatch overhanging the old blue door, a ripple of flame was beginning to creep stealthily, and Maisie turned to Johnnie with an exclamation of alarm. But Johnnie was already in the thick of the fight. He had caught up a pole, dropped by one of the workers, and with the flattened end was beating out the newly kindled thatch, and shouting to Franz where to direct the stream from his water-bucket. Maisie felt the excitement of the fire dancing through her veins; she would have liked to be on the roof herself. Then the thought of Sunshine's danger flashed into her mind, and she ran quickly round to the front of the cottage.

## CHAPTER IX.

### A MOONLIGHT FLIGHT.

THE fire was being borne down on the cottage from the west. Outside the fence, and for some little way to the east of the enclosure, was an expanse of more or less clear ground, where the short turf and gravelly patches of light soil gave no food for the spread of the flames. Here Maisie found Sunshine. She was the centre of a small oasis, lit one moment by the lurid glare of the flames and the next swept by clouds of acrid smoke.

The scene looked strangely weird as Maisie came upon it. A line of workers, mostly women, were conveying the contents of the cottage from the danger within to the comparative safety without. Their runnings to and fro resembled the busy excitement of a disturbed ant heap.

Each household treasure, as it was carried out, was deposited in its place with a certain sense of order, and this sense of order was due to Sunshine, who, from the spot where she had

been deposited, was superintending the disposal of the small stacks of goods and chattels.

"I've been so fussed about you," cried Maisie, running up to her, and she added almost with reproach, "you don't seem in the least fussed. You look as if you were enjoying it."

Sunshine's eyes were shining just as Johnnie's had shone. She was quite composed, and even Maisie's sudden appearance did not seem to surprise her.

"They brought me here to be out of the way," she remarked. "But I really think I've been of some use; there hasn't been anything broken yet."

She picked up a large pincushion, wrapped in an apron, which some motherly soul had laid down beside her, and held it out.

"Pin up your skirts, and put on this apron. Then you can go and help," she said.

Maisie, with a hurried "Are you sure you are all right?" was the next moment amongst the busiest of the crowd. At intervals she found time to run back with the latest reports of those who were fighting the fire. One moment there seemed some hope of its being turned from the apparently doomed cottage; the next, it would break out in a fresh quarter. Weeks of drought had rendered every growing thing as ready fuel for its devouring hunger.

"Those two boys are splendid," exclaimed Maisie as, with her arms full of a miscellaneous collection of oddments, she came to a momentary standstill beside Sunshine.

"They are really splendid," she reiterated. "I wish you could see them. If the cottage is saved, they've done it, but everything is in such a mess. Bits of the thatch have been torn off, and the water is streaming into the holes. That dear old squatterly bit is like a battered wreck."

"I'm so sorry," said Sunshine regretfully.

"I feel rather a beast for having laughed at poor little Boat-a-hoy," said Maisie. "He's as black as a cinder, and working so hard! Johnnie is just the same. I mean he is in the thick of everything."

Johnnie's name ran glibly off her tongue. Somehow she had never thought of him as anything but Johnnie.

Sunshine raised her head. "Maisie!" she exclaimed, "I believe the wind has changed."

Maisie stood motionless for a second or two, watching the sullen cloud of smoke which seemed to have become stationary. Then the heavy wreaths began to move with a steady backward drift over the blackened ground.

"It has!" she cried, and hastily laying down her load, she darted forward to greet a figure which was seen struggling towards them.



It was Mrs. Fancy with a large mattress on her back.

"Mrs. Fancy, Mrs. Fancy!" she called out, "we're saved! The wind has changed. It's blowing the fire away from us!"

Mrs. Fancy allowed the mattress to slip, and shook herself free from it. She gave it a resentful punch as it fell, and then mopped her hot face.

"Well, I never! Just as I'd got that there mattress out too, an' I sayin' to myself, 'ark! make 'aste.' An' I 'opped on the bed and was that light-'arted at savin' it, an' now it might 'ave stayed where it were."

The extraordinary manner in which her good news was welcomed sent Maisie into peals of laughter. It was a relief to laugh now that the anxiety was over, and the ingratitude shown by Mrs. Fancy was certainly very funny.

Mrs. Fancy again seized the mattress.

"I don't say as they 'aven't all worked 'ard, but I pops about as light as any of 'em," she kept asserting loudly, as she tugged valiantly at the weight behind her.

Maisie laid hold of the other end of the mattress and helped to run it over the ground. Then she subsided on to it, still laughing.

Mrs. Fancy began a vigorous drying of the top of her head.

"Don't you go sittin' for long on that mattress," she said, addressing Maisie warningly. "It's wet as wet, same as my 'ead. An' all along of them two young gentlemans as 'as been pourin' water down 'oles on me. Oh, yes! They was 'elpin'! But they was just as 'artful as a bag o' mice in knowin' where my 'ead was!"

"Oh Mrs. Fancy, I'm sure they didn't do it on purpose," remonstrated Sunshine.

"Well, my 'ead's wet, an' that mattress is wet," declared Mrs. Fancy, unconvinced.

"I expect everything is more or less wet"; and Sunshine looked round on the desolation.

Maisie turned startled eyes on her. "What will you do for the night?" she asked.

"I haven't had time to think!" said Sunshine. "Is the cottage quite impossible?"

"More impossible than this," said Maisie.

"Then I suppose I shall have to camp out."

"But the cottage won't be any more fit for you to-morrow, or the next day, or for ever so many more next days," declared Maisie.

It was obvious that the immediate danger of the fire was now over. This was evidenced by the attitude of the general crowd who had been helping to extinguish it. Some vanished quietly into the night; others lingered to beat out the isolated patches of smouldering gorse.

The fire had now nothing to feed on, as the tract of burnt ground, which the change of wind had borne it back on, was exhausted.

Those who had helped in the salvage of the cottage had gathered together, and appeared uncertain as to what to do next. The moon, which had been partially obscured by the dense clouds of smoke, had reappeared again, and shone serenely down on what such a short time before had been an idyllic scene of peaceful beauty. Now, it was as though the devastating scourge of war had passed over it. Smoke-grimed and despoiled was the pretty thatched cottage; its protecting fence broken and charred; its flowers trampled into the soil; only the big standard rose tree and the old vine, had, by reason of their rooted strength, survived destruction. They quivered piteously at the touch of the night breeze, as it sought to soothe their scorched and wounded foliage with its cool fragrance:

"Here come the two heroes," said Maisie, as Johnnie and Franz were seen approaching.

The heroes looked very dirty and dishevelled. Franz was the blacker of the two, and one of his arms was tied up in a shapeless kind of bag. He had found time to retrieve his overcoat from where it had been carefully hidden during the height of the danger, and it hung from his

shoulders in the usual fashion, with the empty sleeves dangling.

Maisie went forward to intercept Johnnie, and drew him aside.

"What are we to do about Sunshine?" she asked.

Johnnie lowered his voice. "When I saw what a touch and go business it was going to be, I——" He hesitated. "I did do something, but I'm not sure what you'll think about it."

"You!" exclaimed Maisie. "What have you done?"

Johnnie looked at her apprehensively.

"I sent a message to the Manor. To—to Mrs. Yorke,"

"You sent a message to stepmama!" Maisie's tone expressed growing astonishment. "What kind of a message? Who took it?"

Johnnie answered her last query.

"There was a nuisance of a small boy kept bothering us, Eli Blades. The boy that used to feed the owl. I sent him. I wanted to get rid of him. He was just out for a lark, and I found him pouring water down on poor old Mrs. Fancy's head."

"And Mrs. Fancy thought it was you. But what kind of a message did you send?" Maisie's voice rose a little scornfully. "And

of all people what made you think of step-mama?"

"It was you made me think of her," said Johnnie.

"I made you think of her!"

"Yes!" answered Johnnie. "I thought she might get together that ambulance corps you told me about, and come and help. I sent to say you were here. I thought they'd like to know."

Maisie was silent. Johnnie had shown a forethought which was surprising, and his concluding remark made her feel vaguely rebuked. She had been carried away by the excitement of the fire, and had given no heed to impending results. It certainly had not occurred to her to think whether her prolonged absence from home at that time of night might cause uneasiness!

"I wonder what will happen!" she said, at length.

"We'll soon know," answered Johnnie. "I hope they will come. Franz has got a nasty burn on his arm."

"We can't let Sunshine be out on the common all night," said Maisie. The next moment she exclaimed, "What's that?"

Johnnie's eyes, following the direction she indicated, could distinguish a small body of

moving figures, evidently bearing a burden, passing at a rapid trot along the outskirts of the blackened area which the fire had devastated.

"Going at the double! Jolly sporting lot!" he ejaculated.

"They're carrying the stretcher, the thing they practised on me with this afternoon," said Maisie.

The ambulance corps had now drawn quite near. It was making for the oasis where Sunshine and the contents of the despoiled cottage had found refuge. The effect given was rather ghostlike. The moving figures and the outline of the stretcher showed black against the smouldering remains of the fire, which in some places still glowed red and angry; and the moonlight served to intensify the scene. As the bearers passed on their way, with a something of mystery in their flitting noiselessness, they might have been taken for a convoy party of the Fraternity of the Misericordia, pursuing its secret deeds of mercy through the streets of some plague-stricken city of mediæval Italy.

"Come on!" said Johnnie. "We must go and explain."

"They explain themselves," answered Maisie. "What's the good of having a uniform, if it doesn't show what they are?"

"Yes. But—aren't you coming to help?" questioned Johnnie.

"A uniform makes them look altogether different from what they do ordinarily," continued Maisie unheedingly. "The front one on this side is the pet lamb with the sticky past. She looks quite smart."

Johnnie frowned, but said nothing.

Maisie rattled on flippantly. "That's step-mama talking to her. Her chin strap's come loose and her hat's tumbling into her eyes. She always drops to pieces."

"Oh don't laugh at them! Come and help," remonstrated Johnnie.

"I'm not laughing at them." Maisie clasped her hands behind her back with sudden perversity.

"Go; if you want to go! I'm not keeping you."

Johnnie's expression changed from remonstrance to hurt surprise.

"All right," he said; and, before Maisie realised that she had lost her detaining power over him, she saw him making his way towards the group, which was now surrounding Sunshine.

Maisie remained standing where Johnnie had left her. She felt strangely discomfited; angry with Johnnie for having taken her so easily at

her word. It wasn't amusing to be left out of things. She shivered a little. Now that the need for action was over she felt the chill of the night air striking through the thin folds of her dress. Reluctantly she took a few steps forward, and then halted. Franz had detached himself from the group, and was running towards her. The shimmer of the moonlight made her look very pale, and he asked anxiously:

"Is you in pain?"

She answered that she was not in pain.

"Then it is that you are cold"; and, before Maisie could remonstrate, he had transferred his overcoat from his own shoulders to hers.

To Maisie's protestations he turned a deaf ear.

"I am sorry about your arm," she said. "Does it ache very badly?"

"Like the flames of the Inferno," admitted Franz candidly. "But I give myself to those Ladies of Mercy. You come? I too!"

And without a murmur of dissent Maisie followed him.



## CHAPTER X.

JOHNNIE COMFORTS MRS. FANCY.

JOHNNIE stood and watched the little cavalcade, as it flitted in and out of moonlight and shadow, until it disappeared from sight. The two figures who followed a few yards behind the stretcher presented an odd contrast. Maisie was still wearing the little German's overcoat, and Franz, at the last moment, had been wrapped up in a pink woollen shawl by Mrs. Fancy.

Mrs. Fancy had insisted upon his wearing the shawl. Having discovered that it was neither Franz nor Johnnie who had poured the water down on her head, she had felt that it eased her conscience to make amends to, at least, one of the maligned heroes for the hastiness of her suspicions.

The ambulance party was on its way to the Manor. To Mrs. Yorke the incident of the fire had brought about one of the supreme moments of her life. She had never before been given an imperative call to action, never been vouchsafed the opportunity of applying

her theoretical knowledge to an actual need. The call had come, and she had been found ready. As she traversed the uneven ground, the weight of the stretcher seemed but a trifle, and her share of the bearing a thing to rejoice over. She could have welcomed a heavier weight and a longer and rougher road.

Johnnie turned from watching the party vanish into the night, to find Mrs. Fancy surreptitiously wiping away a tear which was trickling down her cheek.

"It gives me the feelin' as though they was carryin' 'er off to a cementry," she quavered.

"But it's really much the best way of going," Johnnie assured her. "The paths on the common aren't fit to drive anything over. That thing won't shake her any more than lying on her couch."

Mrs. Fancy looked at the empty couch, and another tear trickled down her cheek; but Johnnie rose to the occasion. He tucked her arm through his and walked her off in the direction of the cottage.

"Now you're not to worry; she's all right," he said encouragingly. "I've stayed behind on purpose to take care of you. What shall we begin on?"

Mrs. Fancy found the touch of boyish atten-

tion comforting. She patted his sleeve with her fat hand, and remarked cheerfully :

“ Well, I does feel ’appier for ’avin’ you.”

Johnnie was not feeling very happy himself. He had elected to stay behind, and no one had disputed his decision. What people volunteered to do in such emergencies was their own business, but he was smarting under a sense of disappointment. He was feeling sore and rather puzzled with regard to Maisie. She had not taken the slightest notice of him since the time he had left her to go to the help of the ambulance party, and she had not even turned her head to say good-night, as she had moved away with Franz in the wake of the little procession.

Her moods had often puzzled him, but they had always fascinated him. On this occasion he was disappointed. He could not understand why she should have treated Mrs. Yorke’s ready response so ungenerously. To him there seemed no amusement in laughing at people for doing kind things. He tried to put the feeling of disappointment away from him. Perhaps he had been stupid, and said something to offend her, and he was to blame and not she. Yet he could not free himself from the impression that Maisie had purposely omitted saying good-night to him. He felt

rather like a child, when it is punished for something it knows it hasn't done and can't explain.

Ernest had been right when he said that Johnnie was still asleep; but the possibilities of an awakening were not very far below the surface. What existed there, and what was at the root of a great deal of his seeming indifference was a form of self-consciousness which threw him back on himself. The something within him which craved for recognition, for power of expressing itself, was there, but he did not know what it was, or what it demanded of him. There is a certain form of self-consciousness of which youth alone knows the difficulty and often agony. As the sensitive plate of a photograph captures the vision before it, so to youth, the significance of what is going on around it is reflected emotionally, but the captured vision is often confused by its own inexperience. It exaggerates to the point of pain; it cannot stretch out to see the uses of such pain.

What untold wealth of human knowledge and understanding, of intuition regarding things felt and yet unseen, is gained by the acutely sensitive at the cost of their own pain! They suffer; but in a sense which trains the observation to sympathy, which cautions the hasty

judgment, which opens the eyes to see, with intent to see. .

Is the price too high to pay? God forbid! The climbing heavenwards is slow, and not one of the steps of the way is like another, for some must be worn by the hurrying feet, and others by those who only stand and wait.

Mrs. Fancy's motherly pat on Johnnie's arm helped in a measure to dispel his feeling of gloom. Mrs. Fancy was only a fat sentimental old woman, but she wanted him. It was very pleasant to be wanted. The villagers had now all dispersed, and gone back to their homes. There had been promise of further help when daylight revealed the extent of the damage; but they were hard-working people who would have to be up betimes to start on their own daily round of toil, and the hours of sleep were precious.

The little cottage looked sadly forlorn and desolate, and Mrs. Fancy hesitated at the open door when she saw the dreariness of the interior at which the moonlight seemed to mock. Fresh tears were perilously near. The dreariness had quite the opposite effect upon Johnnie. It appealed to him as part of the novelty of the night's adventure, and he began to explore with interest. The kitchen and Mrs. Fancy's own particular end of the cottage were dismantled,

but they had been left practically undamaged by the fire. In a very short time he had carried back and replaced all that she would find necessary for the night.

"And now you are to go to bed and not bother," he told her. "I'm going to camp out and do policeman." And he shut the door on her, and would not listen to any remonstrances.

He returned to the oasis, and hunted about amongst the remaining heap of household goods for the wherewithal to make a bed. This part of the adventure was quite amusing. He was still young enough to be able to enjoy it. Maisie's stories of the squatters and their ways recurred to him. He was harking back to the primitive; and he curled himself into the nest he had made by the side of a gorse bush, and was soon as sound asleep as a dormouse.

The dawn broke, and the stars faded into the pale newness of the young day. The scent, which the night dews had sweetened into fresh fragrance, mingled with the smell of the burnt gorse. The sun rose to climb his daily span of the great arch, and still Johnnie slept. The pulse of Nature beat and throbbed in all around him, but nothing stirred the serenity of his slumbers. The first sight his eyes opened on was Mrs. Fancy, who in a spotlessly white apron was looking as fresh and comfortable as

though she had not been up half the night, and been more or less burnt out of house and home.

"What a nice clean face you've got," murmured Johnnie drowsily.

Mrs. Fancy regarded the recumbent form which lay at her feet with a broad smile.

"I specs you'd get a fright if you saw yours," she answered.

Johnnie stretched his arms, and then folded them behind his head.

"I feel rather a sweep," he answered, and yawned. "Nice morning, isn't it?" he added.

Mrs. Fancy licked her finger and held it up in the still air.

"Not a wag o' wind," she announced with satisfaction. "I was afraid that with it changin' that sudden last night, we'd 'ave 'ad a storm, an' then there would 'ave been a nice flyin' about an' messin' of all them things."

Johnnie yawned again. He looked like a big hungry baby waiting for its bottle.

"You wants your breakfast, that's what you wants," said Mrs. Fancy, "an' I've got it all ready for you. A nice tasty one! I've been up this good hour an' more, an' I've cleaned my kitchen, an' got my kettle boilin', an' things is wonderful straight considerin'."

Johnnie roused himself. "Breakfast!"

He snuffed the air. "Smells good. What is it?"

"It's the toastin' of the dried 'addock as you smells," said Mrs. Fancy. "I do loves a bit o' dried 'addock. Some folks thinks a heap o' fresh fish. I wouldn't give a toss up for a barry load o' fresh fish if I could 'ave a bit o' dried 'addock."

Johnnie had shaken himself clear of his impromptu bed, and was looking rather ruefully at the smudges which his smoke-blackened face and hands had made on the whiteness of the blankets.

Mrs. Fancy treated the matter tolerantly.

"Well, you couldn't see what you was grabbin' at in the dark, could you? Though I must say as you was sharp in pickin' out the best blankets."

"Where's the pump?" asked Johnnie.

Mrs. Fancy laughed, and led the way round to the back premises of the cottage, and introduced him to the pump. She also supplied him with a towel and a large slab of yellow soap, and, with the admonition that he was to "make 'aste or the 'addock would be toasted dry," she left him to his ablutions.

There followed a great sound of splashing, and when Johnnie appeared, after a few minutes, clean and hungrier than before, it was



to find breakfast laid ready on the kitchen table, and Mrs. Fancy in the act of removing the 'addock from the toaster. He was genuinely truthful, when he assured her at the end of the meal, that he had never enjoyed a breakfast so much in his life. He had certainly eaten enough to please even Mrs. Fancy's bountiful hospitality.

"Well, you're not one as pecks," she said approvingly. "Dainty feeders is 'ard to please, an' that's discouragin' to them as cooks for 'em."

The day was yet young when Johnnie left the scene of the last night's disaster. But, when kindly neighbours returned with practical offers of help, and he saw that he was no longer wanted, he took his leave. A remark of Mrs. Fancy's rather hastened than retarded his departure.

"I'm lookin' out every minute to see Miss Maisie round 'ere," she said. "She rides of a morning with her pa, and I'm 'opin' as she might just look in to tell me what's a' doin' with my little lady after all this scare."

Johnnie felt that he did not wish to meet Maisie just then, and he was not inclined to linger. As he was leaving, Mrs. Fancy broke off a rose-bud from the big standard rose-tree,

which had miraculously escaped scorching, and fastened it into his buttonhole.

"Now I wonder as 'ow long you'll keep that fresh and lively," she said, standing back to survey her handiwork with her head on one side. "There's a sayin' as flowers allus fades on flirts. When I was a gal, flowers died at the look o' me! Miss Maisie there! She's just the same. That flirgation, it ain't no use givin' her a posy."

The word "flirgation" rankled in Johnnie's mind as he wended his homeward way. He wished Mrs. Fancy had not put such an idea into his head. Maisie a little flirt! He didn't like to think of her in that way, and yet he knew that if she were sweet and nice to him the next time they met he would forget every kind of caution. Just at that moment he felt shy of meeting her, but, when they did meet, he would not be able to resist her. She held some kind of spell over him that he had no wish to resist! It had come to that, and he could not help himself.

## CHAPTER XI.

### ERNEST PURSUES THE AUTOMATIC-BUTTON-PRESSER.

It was a much perturbed Ernest who presented himself at the Manor on the afternoon following the night of the fire. Johnnie had been the first to inform him of the disaster, and he was oppressed with the misgiving that the episode of Mr. Brown's release and the burning of the cage might have had something to do with the setting alight of the common.

He met Mrs. Yorke on the doorstep. She had just emerged from the gloomy portals of Black Maria, a carriage was waiting for her, and a harassed footman was busy packing into every available corner of it a multitude of parcels of all shapes and sizes, which seemed to tumble to pieces whenever he touched them.

Mrs. Yorke was on her way to open a bazaar; but she stood on the doorstep for quite a long time conversing with Ernest. People generally did find time to converse with Ernest; he was always so interested in what they had to say. Mrs. Yorke even went so far as to ask him to

accompany her to the bazaar; and Ernest, out of sheer pity for the friendless condition of the parcels might have consented, had she not added the request that he would mount the platform with her, and support her opening speech. He handed her into the carriage with great politeness, and saw it drive off with something of relief. She had invited him to a luncheon party on the following day, and he had accepted the invitation.

But he was not altogether satisfied with the result of his visit. He had elicited the information that Sunshine had not suffered from the effects of the fire; but Mrs. Yorke's mind had been so full of the business on hand, and there had been so many distractions regarding the parcels, that the only definite knowledge he retained was, that Sunshine was installed in a shady corner of the terrace, in an invalid chair which worked automatically. Mrs. Yorke had assured him on this point impressively.

"It has only just been patented under the name of the Automatic-Button-Presser. It gives ease and complete independence as each button has its own directions printed on the dial plate, and the patient can move backwards or forwards, or perform any kind of evolution without calling for assistance."

Ernest did not feel quite happy about the

Automatic-Button-Presser. He thought he would like to make its personal acquaintance, and discover for himself whether it deserved its reputation. He also wished to see Franz, who presumably was still at the Manor. The footman had vanished with his arms full of the remains of the parcels which had been left on the doorstep, and Ernest waited, but the man did not return. If Black Maria possessed a bell, it was secreted so that only the initiated knew where to find it, and Ernest searched in vain. He decided to make investigation on his own account.

"If I'm seen I'll probably be taken for the piano-tuner, or the man that comes to wind the clocks," he told himself consolingly, as, following the direction which he knew must lead to the terraced side of the house, he made his way thither. The sound of voices attracted him, and he thought he recognised the uplifted tones of one as those of Franz, Herr Becker. He slackened his pace, and paused as he rounded a cluster of flowering shrubs, for the group on the terrace had come into view before he was himself visible. Just as the subtle atmosphere of charm had captured him when he had come so unexpectedly on the scene of the pretty thatched cottage within its sheltering fence, so again this same subtle atmosphere of charm

met him here. The environment was changed; the grey façade of the stately old house gave an entirely different stamp of race and class to that of the background of white-washed walls and thatched roof. In place of the old vine, clambering unpruned over its rude scaffolding of hazel poles, an ancient yew, quaintly clipped, threw its velvety shadow over the terraced steps. In a niche of the wall behind it, a stone griffin mounted guard over a tinkling fountain, and the cool sound of water fell gratefully on the ear. Out in the sunlight, the flowers dazzled the eye, and smooth levels of lawn stretched almost to the boundaries of the park railings beyond.

Under the shade of the old yew tree was cool peace. The scent of heliotrope and mignonette and all manner of sweet things was wafted from the boxes which stood along the ledges of the windows, and even the Automatic-Button-Presser seemed to have adapted itself to the fitness of its surroundings. Its elaborate mechanism was tenderly shrouded by some soft hued embroidery, which drooped to the flagged pavement; the only element which might have been considered to strike a discordant note in the tranquil scene was the presence of Franz. He sat huddled up in a basket chair with one arm strapped to his bosom and the other clasp-

ing himself together about the waistband; the pain-stricken expression on his face indicating that the cause of his distress lay somewhere in that region of his body. Ernest could hear his dolorous plaint from where he was standing.

“It may be that she is of excellent goodness the Frau Yorke; but *Ach!* I now have such pains because of her. She gave me something for my health, and I say to her—I do not like this stuff, it does not agree with me, it walks in my body. But *nein!* She is *nicht practisch*. She tell me that she go to bed last night with her boots on for to be ready. But for what readiness! We was all saved. There was no occasion to go to bed with her boots on except to give her husband the pleasure to exclaim, *Was der Teufel!*”

Franz hugged his waist still tighter, and the wail continued. Ernest gathered from the tone of the voice which answered that Sunshine was attempting to comfort the distressed one, but Franz would not be comforted.

“No! I step away from her. I say, I do not wish to die. I get some use out of being alive. If it is not there, I make it.”

Sunshine glanced up, and saw Ernest. Her momentary surprise flashed into a smile of welcome. It was evident that he was not an

intruder. He mounted the terrace steps and made his way towards the old yew tree.

"I am so very glad to hear that you are none the worse of last night's experience," he said, as Sunshine gave him her hand.

"I was so well taken care of," she answered. "I look all right, don't I? And such a charming place has been found for me. How did you know where to find it?"

"I met Mrs. Yorke," said Ernest. "She was just starting off to keep an appointment, and she had not time to tell me as much as I wanted to know, so I thought I might be allowed to pay my respects personally."

He glanced at Franz, and raised his eyebrows enquiringly. "My dear boy, what's the matter? Are you not feeling well?"

Franz was obviously feeling far from well.

"I think I had better take him away," said Ernest; and, assisting Franz to his feet, he proceeded to convey him into the house. It was some time before he made his appearance again, and then he sat down in the chair from which Franz had been evicted.

"It's all right," he said. "I've put him to bed. He behaves like a perfect baby if he thinks he's ill; and yet I hear he showed plenty of pluck last night."

"Indeed he did; they all did; and everyone



has been so kind," said Sunshine. "I am most grateful."

Ernest regarded her anxiously. "Do you think the burning of Mr. Brown's cage started the fire?" he asked.

"It might," admitted Sunshine reluctantly. "Everything was so dry. A carrying spark may have fallen and smouldered."

Ernest's remorse deepened. "And I imagined I was doing something so exceedingly useful."

Sunshine did not, at once, respond. Then she said softly, "Don't worry about it; perhaps it's been just—the giving of a chance." A little pink crept into her cheeks. "I had to be helped you see, and—I think it pleased Mrs. Yorke to be able to help me."

"Well, if you can take it that way——" Ernest hesitated. And she interposed quickly:

"It's quite a pleasant way, and everyone wants to make it pleasant, so you need not be sorry for me. They tell me that there is no damage done to the cottage which can't be put right. It belongs to the Squire, you know, and they want me to stay here till it is ready for me to go back."

"So you don't wish to be moaned over," said Ernest. "I can assure you I have been most unhappy in thinking this disaster may have

been caused through some carelessness on my part."

"There is nothing to moan over," Sunshine answered with decision; and then she laughed, and removing a fold of the coverlet which draped the Automatic-Button-Presser disclosed its workings.

"Isn't it wonderful?" she said. "Mrs. Yorke bought it from an advertisement, and no one would get ill and use it. It had to be hidden, and now! It has become a priceless treasure!"

"Take care it doesn't run away with you," cautioned Ernest. "You ought to have a watcher. Where is your little Miss Maisie?"

"She has gone up to town for the day with her father. I think a ball frock has something to say in the matter. Next week there are to be gay doings here. Birthday rejoicings! There always are festivities on Maisie's birthday, but this time, they are to be very special. It is her eighteenth birthday, and her coming of age. By some settlement of a will she comes into a little fortune of her own on that day. The festivities are mostly local, but the people make a great deal of these birthdays. Maisie is a little person of importance, their future 'Lady of the Manor.'"

"Mrs. Yorke invited me to a luncheon party to-morrow, and I accepted," remarked Ernest.

Sunshine smiled.

"That hasn't anything to do with the birthday festivities. Were you told what kind of a party it was going to be?"

"No, why? Is there anything peculiar about it?"

"According to Maisie, it is to be something quite out of the common. Oddities you know! mostly children. They follow a cult, or rather their parents make them follow it."

Ernest considered for a moment.

"I wonder what made Mrs. Yorke ask me? Perhaps it's something to do with my clothes. Johnnie says I might be mistaken for anything. She may have thought I belonged to a cult. Shall I back out of it?"

"I think Mrs. Yorke would be disappointed if you did," said Sunshine.

"You think so! Very well then, I'll come, and I'll stick to my clothes—these ones I mean—it may be that they took her fancy. You see I'm such a vagrant kind of mortal, and I pick up clothes as I go along. I was doing a bit of Bohemianism when I bought these, and they won't wear out! Is Johnnie asked to this party?"

"I don't think so," said Sunshine.

Ernest had risen preparatory to taking his leave, and was standing twirling his hat round and round between his fingers.

"Johnnie's in low spirits to-day," he said. "I asked him to come with me here, and he made an excuse, and his excuse seemed to me very feeble."

"Perhaps he would have been disappointed if he had come," suggested Sunshine.

"Of course he would!" Ernest rumped up his hair, and then put on his hat.

"Oh, these foolish young people," he murmured. And having ascertained what time the luncheon party was to take place on the following day, he took his departure by the same circuitous route as that by which he had come.

## CHAPTER XII.

### MAISIE HEADS A REBELLION.

IT was evident when Ernest arrived, shortly before the luncheon hour the following day, that he had given consideration to the idea that Mrs. Yorke might be disappointed if he made any difference in his outward apparel. He had even expanded a little upon the original. The fly-away French tie was knotted with more than its wonted negligence, and he was wearing rather a pronounced style of checked shirt. The checks were red and spidery and wide apart, and allowed for plenty of cuff room.

After paying his respects to his hostess, whom he had some difficulty in finding, he made his way out on to the terrace, and in the shadow of the yew tree he found Sunshine.

"I arrived with some of the guests," he announced. "I got mixed up with a procession of—I suppose they were children! Poor little mortals; they most of them looked badly off for a digestion. They were being shepherded by a lady like a floating cobweb in a long green gauze veil!"

"I hope the procession will come this way," said Sunshine.

"They were being headed off indoors," answered Ernest. "I expect the cult has some kind of rites to get through before feeding. They weren't even dressed like ordinary children. The boys were in blue trunk hose and brown tights. They had evidently had bowls put on their heads and their hair cut round. It stuck out—oh, kind of Knave of Hearts business. And the girls? Pretty little dears if they'd been left alone. They were tied up in things like——"

"Pink flannel bolsters," interposed Maisie, who had stepped out through the French windows of a sitting room at the back which had been specially set apart for Sunshine's use. The Automatic-Button-Presser could pass in and out of it easily.

The booming of a gong was heard in the distance.

"That's only the first," said Maisie. "When number two goes we must begin to run." She regarded Ernest with a quizzical pursing up of her lips. "You look nervous," she remarked.

"I feel worse than I look," answered Ernest. "Is one allowed anything in the way of a revival, or is the cult strictly teetotal?"

"You may drink buttercup cordial, if you lap it from a saucer," answered Maisie.

"Lap!" echoed Ernest.

Maisie nodded.

"It's supposed to keep your mouth in the shape of a Cupid's bow when you're drinking. The cult believes in beauty. You're allowed to wear bibs."

"Bibs!" Ernest produced his pocket-handkerchief. "I wish I had brought two," he said mournfully. "Buttercup cordial sounds horribly messy, and these home-brews are none so innocent. I once heard a man declare he went quite squiffy on peppermint wine."

"And I've heard of a cow who went quite dead after swallowing a brass door knob," retorted Maisie.

The gong boomed for a second time, and she held out her hand. "Now you must fly, or you'll miss the bib tying"; and Ernest found himself being swirled along the terrace in the direction of an open door before he quite realised what was going to happen. He waved a hand as he was on the point of disappearing, and Sunshine caught a fleeting fragment of speech. "Don't," and "Return," and "Between the courses" was all that she could distinguish. Some time later, when she had finished her own luncheon, which disappointed her by not being

in any way peculiar, she discovered the meaning of Ernest's parting speech.

From a window, which opened on a level with the ground, she saw him stealthily emerge bearing a tray, which he piloted along the terrace and laid on the table beside her.

"I thought that in case you might have been treated to the extraordinary fare that we have, I would bring you something at least harmless," he explained. "No one saw me. I hope I shan't be pursued."

On the tray was a plate of brown bread, of a peculiarly drab colour, and a bunch of grapes.

Sunshine thanked him, but admitted that no experiment had been tried with her luncheon tray.

"All right, then. We'll share the grapes, and give the bread to the sparrows," said Ernest. Before seating himself, he went over to the balustrade and emptied the contents of his pockets amongst the bushes.

"Do you know what I was doing?" he said as he came back. "I was chucking away your little Miss Maisie's lunch. There I was, sitting beside her munching away at raw carrots, and chunks of green things I didn't even know the name of. Everything was raw! And all the time the naughty monkey was stuffing my pockets with the things she wouldn't eat herself."



Ernest sank into a chair with a sigh.

"Oh, those poor children," he kept repeating. "What will the next generation be like? I asked the thing next me why it wasn't eating its raw carrot, and it said it was waiting for the grated cheese!"

Ernest's expression was tragic. Sunshine moved the grapes nearer to him, and he ate some, and they appeared to have a reviving effect. He began to crumble down the bread for the sparrows.

"Do you know," he volunteered confidentially, "the only one out of all that lot who seemed to love tying on a child's bib was Mrs. Yorke? She looked like a different woman when she was doing it."

"She wants something to give love to," said Sunshine softly.

Ernest threw a handful of crumbs on the flags, and the sparrows descended in a swoop.

"And no one to give it to. Yes, that hits hardest."

He watched the sparrows musingly. "It's a sad muddle all through. I'm sorry for the girl; but I'm a deal sorrier for the stepmother. If she only could be made more impressive somehow. If she had a temper, and hit back. If she struck out a line for herself and held to

it. But these little piffling fads, like to-day's business! It really was very unwholesome, and what does it lead to? To-morrow some one of them will start a new cult, and they'll all be running after that. Good excellent women, no doubt, but just like buckets that are always being emptied and refilled; they seem to have no permanent individuality."

"It's having a sad effect on Maisie's character," said Sunshine, with a sigh. "She delights in turning everything Mrs. Yorke does into ridicule."

The sound of a shrill voice was heard protesting from the open window through which Ernest had made his escape with the tray. A small figure was seen struggling with a detaining hand.

"My friend who wouldn't eat his carrot without the grated cheese," said Ernest. The child came off victorious by leaving his waistband behind him; and, after tumbling out of the window, he gathered himself together and advanced along the terrace with a curious kind of strut. His stilted gait was mainly owing to the uncomfortableness of his garments, for the trunk hose and the brown tights pinched his poor little body painfully. At the same time he was obviously vain of his appearance, and was as pert as one of the sparrows.

He came to a standstill in front of Ernest, and looked him up and down.

"Holloa, old pantry towels!" he chirped.

Ernest glanced down at his shirt cuffs. He shot them out a little further to show more of the checks, and, leaning back in his chair, crossed his legs.

"Wouldn't you like to go and play at marbles?" he suggested genially.

"No; would you?" was the ready retort.

More struggling was heard from the open window; and a scuffling of little legs and arms. An excited bobbing in and out of heads heralded the approach of a general outburst from within. First one small figure popped out, and then another, until soon a stream of children were scattering themselves in all directions. The natural instinct of childhood for irresponsible action drew them this way and that. They hopped up and down the terrace steps, chased each other along the flat top of the balustrade, and spun round in circles on the flagged pavement, with the sportive aimlessness of little mice running after their own tails. The artificiality of their odd garments lost their grotesqueness, and seemed to blend in Nature's kinship with the birds and the flowers and the blue of the sky.

Maisie was the leader of the revels. She had incited the revolt; she laughed defiance at the remonstrances of the cult. The idea of rules was scorned. Put the children to bed in dark rooms for an hour's digestive repose? The idea was preposterous. The summer gladness was calling to them to be out and the children danced round her in an ecstasy of delight. She was the gayest and merriest of them all; and with a reckless disregard to consequences they revelled in their freedom.

On the topmost step of the terrace Mrs. Yorke stood alone and watched the scene before her. There was a curious expression on her face; a mixture of apology and obstinacy. She stood isolated from the groups of distracted mothers and guardians, who were hovering in the background, and they were at a loss to understand why she did not make some effort to enforce order. She alone could assume authority, and she was simply standing looking on, and doing nothing!

Then Franz appeared upon the scene, evidently quite recovered from his indisposition. It might almost have seemed as though his coming had been prearranged. Maisie and her little rebels received him with open arms, and he sat down on the step not far from Mrs. Yorke and, producing from his pocket a curious

looking instrument, which he manipulated with deft fingers, he put it to his mouth, and a sweet sound, high and clear, fell sharply on the air. After a few preliminary trills, the piping swelled in volume. It broke into a dancing tune, a lilting catch in its marked time, which set the children pirouetting on their toes, with their arms waving fantastically. Like the Pied Piper of Hamelin, Franz gathered his tripping flock behind him; and, threading his way with conscious pride between the rose borders and the dazzling banks of flowers, he crossed the lawn to where the grateful shade of trees fell athwart a stretch of soft green turf. Maisie held a child by either hand, while others caught on to the scarf which floated behind her. It was a pretty sight; the music rose wilder and sweeter, and Franz forgot his pomposity, and threw his whole soul into his playing, conjuring up a wealth of mimicry for the nimble feet, which responded to the spirit of his muse.

Suddenly a small figure darted out from the ranks, and in stumbling haste clambered up the terraced steps and seized Mrs. Yorke by the hand.

It was the little precocity who had sat next to Ernest at lunch. Mrs. Yorke had tied his bib for him.

"Come on!" he cried, pulling at her hand.

"Never mind if you can't dance. Just jig. I'll hold on to you."

He had released himself from his tight clothes by bursting every available button. His hair was rumpled into a curly mop; and he looked a child!

"Come on!" he repeated. "Come and jig with me."

A dull red flush rose to Mrs. Yorke's face at the touch of the hot little hand which clung to hers. She was wanted; she was being clamoured for.

"May we have strawberry squashes? And may we walk about while we're eating them?" demanded the child eagerly.

"Yes—oh yes!" murmured Mrs. Yorke. She glanced apprehensively over her shoulder. None of the cult was within earshot. "I'll go and see about it," she added in a firmer tone.

The child twirled himself round with a delighted shout, and the tails of his buttonless coat were sent flying.

He screamed the good news at the pitch of his voice. "Strawberry squashes. Strawberry squashes." He caught sight of Ernest, who had drawn near, and pointed a finger at him.

"Come on, old pantry towels! Strawberry squashes! We're all to have them. You, too. Come on!"

Mrs. Yorke had turned away towards the house to give the necessary order. She saw Sunshine lying in her corner quiet and still, and she hesitated. Ernest noticed the hesitation, and thought he divined its meaning.

"Do you think we could get the Automatic-Button-Presser down to the shade there, where the children are dancing?" he said.

Mrs. Yorke's face lightened. "It is guaranteed to work under any conditions—quite automatically. But perhaps if——"

"If I walked on one side, and you on the other?" suggested Ernest.

The child uplifted his voice, and clung to Mrs. Yorke's hand.

"But you said you were going to see about the strawberry squash," he clamoured impatiently.

Ernest picked up the clamourer by the seat of his trunk hose. He shook him gently as he would a fractious puppy, and put him down on all fours.

"You try turning somersaults across the lawn there, and show us the way," he said. "We're going to bring this lady in the chair down to eat strawberry squashes with you. You must make her a nice one."

The afternoon proved a glorious success so far as the children were concerned. It was not

until the little guests had taken their reluctant departure, that the mystery of how the revolt had been brought about was divulged to Sunshine.

The lawn was now deserted, and Maisie threw herself down on the grass at Sunshine's side.

"I'm so hot—but it was worth it." She laughed triumphantly. "Wasn't it delicious the way everything was turned topsy turvy? I planned it all, and I beguiled Boat-a-hoy into helping. He was an inspiration. I could almost have kissed his ugly little face, when he took that whistle thing out of his pocket. And he did play well!"

She began to fan her face with her handkerchief. "It's the best score I've ever had off Stepmama," she remarked complacently. "How idiotic they all looked! The cult I mean. Just like a lot of silly hens round a duck pond when they've lost their chicks. Stepmama looked the silliest, and she hadn't a chick among them!"

"Don't say things like that," remonstrated Sunshine in a pained voice.

"Why shouldn't I say things that are true!"

"I am sure Mrs. Yorke feels pleased that the children were happy," said Sunshine.

"Feels!" scoffed Maisie. "She has no



more feeling than a dummy. She just is one!"

There was no answer, and Maisie leant back to look up into Sunshine's face.

"You lie there looking like a little pink and blue saint, and I believe you are turning over in your mind how to give me a scolding," she said with an attempt at lightness which was a good deal assumed.

There was no answer, and she exclaimed petulantly, "why are you so unsympathetic? I don't believe you love me a bit!"

She felt a hand touch her hair caressingly.

"I love you very dearly; and it is because I love you that I cannot bear to hear you say things like—what you said just now."

Sunshine's voice quivered a little, but she added firmly: "You are setting your own price on yourself Maisie, when you say things like that. It was cheap wit; it was vulgar."

There was an ominous silence for a few moments, and then Maisie sprang to her feet. She stood very erect, and her eyes sparkled brightly.

"If anyone else had said that to me, I should have been angry, or—or laughed. But for you to say it! It hurts—hurts horribly," she exclaimed; and, turning sharply, she fled, and the sheltering trees of the park hid her vanishing figure from sight.

Sunshine lay back against her cushions. She looked white and spent, and she repeated Maisie's parting words more than once.

"It hurts—hurts horribly."

A pitying sadness crept into her eyes.

"It will have to hurt so often," she murmured. "Hurt horribly. It's the only way to learn how not to hurt."

## CHAPTER XIII.

“IT HURTS! IT HURTS HORRIBLY.”

It was with a passionate protest of rebellion flaming hot within her at the unexpectedness of Sunshine's rebuke, that Maisie fled to the cover of the woods.

“It hurts—hurts horribly.” That had been her cry; but it had been her vanity that had been hurt more sorely than any deeper feeling. Maisie had never been taught to consider the results of her speech or actions. She was quick-witted, ready of brain, and vitally alive to what attracted her. Discrimination meant simply a matter of her own likes and dislikes. She could not be altogether blamed for the apparent superficiality of her attitude towards life; the haphazard quality of the education she had received lay behind her like a badly put together piece of patchwork. Governess had succeeded governess with kaleidoscope-like rapidity. Their transitory flights had engendered a light-hearted pessimism as regarded the uses of discipline, and Maisie's sense of reverence had been inevitably blunted by such an

upbringing. Her father's authority over her had counted for nothing; he had never exercised any. Until the time came for Maisie to put up her hair and adopt long frocks, he had treated her as an amusing plaything; and, when the amusing plaything emancipated itself, and threatened to upset the equilibrium of his routine, he had taken prompt measures to throw his responsibilities on to some one else's shoulders. That they might not prove to be the right shoulders was a contingency he had been too hurried to consider.

Poor little ignorant Maisie! An unbridled tongue, let to trip out its shallow criticisms heedlessly, can sadly blunt its own heart's susceptibilities. A daring flippancy in youth may pass as wit; but a man or a woman who gives reckless license to speech grows callous to the pain they may make others suffer. Building up a dreary solitude for the years to come, they are turning a love-destroying weapon of their own making against themselves.

Maisie was as familiar with every glade in the woods as she was with the paths on the common; instinct took her to where the light was dimmest, and where no glad song of bird disturbed the stillness. A group of giant pines, towering dark above the greener foliage, land-marked the spot and intensified the gloom.

The ground was thickly strewn with pine needles; and their aromatic fragrance rose like incense, as her feet sunk into the soft carpet with muffled tread.

From the stem of one great tree the resin was oozing. It was her favourite, and she always chose to sit close under it and lean against its rough bark. With an impatient swerve she passed it by, her gesture almost uttering the words “everything’s wrong”; and, kicking some prickly cones out of the way, she seated herself on an open patch, and dug her heels into the softly yielding ground. Resting her elbows on her knees, and her chin on her clasped hands, she prepared to nurse the inward torment of her wounded feelings.

But it was not so easy as she had imagined. A conflict was warring within her. The unreasoning anger of a thwarted child was confronted with the perplexities of a new problem.

“You put your own price on yourself when you say things like that,” Sunshine had said. Maisie was unversed in logic; but the crudest deductive reasoning could not get away from the point that Sunshine had meant that Maisie, by her speech and action, had set her own price at cheap and vulgar.

Cheap and vulgar! She writhed inwardly at the thought that Sunshine should have said

such a thing. She loved Sunshine, but she was resentful of the smallest shadow of disapproval. It was a jealously possessive love, and jealousy had caught fire at its own flame.

A pine cone, which had withstood the winter's blasts, dropped from the tree above. It fell close to her side amongst those she had petulantly kicked out of her way. Absent-mindedly she began playing with the cones, setting them upright in rows and knocking them over. One little pair would not be knocked over. Their crinkled spikes were generously expanded to help in the holding up of each other's strength, and Maisie let them be, and began to build a rampart of other cones round them. The soldierly erectness of her little army challenged her interest. It was all so trivial, begun unconscious of intent; but it helped to break the harshness of her mood. Perhaps the soothing quiet of the woods was also compelling. The freedom accorded to Maisie's youth had fostered in her a love of Nature which had been the one safeguarding influence of her life. She responded to the touch of what was primitive. Whilst her hands played idly, the under-current of her thoughts dwelt less rebelliously on the smart of her pain. As she touched the little brown cones, they seemed to acknowledge a hidden mystery of

understanding, and to offer the balm of healing. For materialism is but the shell for the spirit to work in, and the unseen pleads for disclosure through the animate and the inanimate alike.

After Maisie had marshalled her army into squares and columns, she surveyed it critically.

“You’re just made up of a lot of little nothings, but you don’t look cheap and vulgar.”

She uttered the last two words out aloud, slowly and distinctly, with the determination that her own ears should hear them. She felt better after the penance was over. Then she sat for a few minutes very still with her eyes half closed. The only solitude that appealed to Maisie was the solitude of Nature. She had not arrived at the discovery that the best in her was seeking shape and colour from these hours of musing watchfulness. When at length she rose reluctantly, she stretched out her arms, as though casting from her the visions of her dreams.

“Good-bye,” she said, as she stepped over the heads of the pine cones. “Stick close together, and don’t let the squirrels knock you down.” And the next moment the grove was deserted save for the serried ranks of the little brown army.

She did not retrace her steps by the way she had come, but pressed onwards, and the dimness

lightened as she proceeded. The trees stood wider apart, and, though their shadows fell heavily, shafts of light from the lowering sun penetrated. Stealthily they crept under the droop of lace-like ferns, mellowing the tussocks of emerald-hued moss, seeking out the tiny worlds of plant life, which reveal their beauty only to the wooing of the sun's evening caress.

Presently she struck into a wider track; the deep ruts showing where the forester's wagons had been at work during the winter months. The track terminated in a wooden gate, which opened out into one of the private roads traversing the park. Maisie had intended to pass out by the gate; but she found that it was padlocked. She was hesitating whether to climb over it or return through the woods, when she caught sight of two mounted figures crossing an open space of green in the park beyond.

The men were in polo dress. The one nearest to her was her father; the one beyond was half hidden by the Squire's figure, but she could see that he was riding her own favourite pony.

The Squire possessed a private polo-ground of his own. It afforded him much personal enjoyment, and it was a very popular institution in the county. The ground was beautifully situated on the outskirts of the park, and was in



miniature a perfectly appointed little Hurlingham in its way.

Maisie knew as much about the game as her father did, and could train a pony infinitely better.

She stood quite still behind the gate, and watched the two figures. The Squire's voice could be heard distinctly. He was rapping out staccato barks of comment on some one's play who had incurred his displeasure. He brought his hand down on his pony's shoulder with a resounding smack, and the animal jerked up his head and forged onwards. The man riding beyond the Squire came into sharp relief against the background of green, and Maisie's eyes narrowed a little as they focussed his figure.

Yes! It was Johnnie, and he was riding her pony. The discovery did not surprise her. Sight only corroborated the thought which had been in her mind. She had not forgotten the parting with Johnnie on the night of the fire. She knew that he had been vexed with her, and why. It was all quite fresh in her memory; but, as her gaze followed him, it was with smiling eyes of admiration.

"He's got a pretty seat, and he must have hands," she murmured to herself. "Dainty likes him. If he'd been pulling her mouth about she'd be fretting."

Johnnie looked his best in the saddle, and the easy bearing of his figure showed to advantage under the light weight of his polo clothes. A slanting beam of sunshine seemed to follow him as he moved, touching with a glint of gold his uncovered head and flickering on the sleeves of his loose shirt, where the thin silk was turned up above his elbows. Perhaps some mesmeric force made him conscious that he was being watched. Maisie was unaware of any intent to will him to look back; but he did look back, and he saw her and involuntarily checked his pony's pace. Dainty was wheeled round, and, crossing the patch of open, was brought up to the gate. The manoeuvre was executed so rapidly that the Squire proceeded on his way, as unconscious of the futility of the noise he was making as a dog baying at the moon.

Johnnie bent his head to escape a drooping branch, and it brought him very near to the level of Maisie.

"I—I just wanted to say that——" He coloured up quickly. "That it's jolly cheek of me to be riding your pony. I hope you don't mind very much?"

Maisie looked Dainty over. Johnnie would rather she had looked at him. He wanted to forget all about that little episode on the night of the fire, and he would like to feel that she had forgotten also.

Maisie's first words reassured him. Probably she had never given a thought to the matter, he concluded.

"How do you like her?" she asked, as she brushed away the flies which were gathering about Dainty's ears.

"She's a little beauty," said Johnnie.

"I trained her myself," said Maisie with some pride.

A shout was heard from the Squire. "Hi there! Where the——"

The shout swelled into a roar. Johnnie's whereabouts had been discovered, and the Squire was seen bearing down on the delinquent. Seeing Maisie leaning over the top of the gate he brought his pony alongside of Dainty.

It did not occur to him to ask questions. He immediately plunged into a revised edition of the grievance upon which he had been expatiating. Then he broke off suddenly to give Johnnie a thump on the back.

"An all round good un'," he exclaimed; and, having delivered himself of this gratuitous piece of praise, he gave a shake to his pony's bridle, and turned back in the homeward direction. He was almost out of earshot when he called over his shoulder:

"Dinner at half-past eight sharp!"

"Was that meant for you?" asked Maisie.

"I suppose so," said Johnnie. "He made me send for my things."

He hoped Maisie would say something to show that she was pleased, but she only remarked, apropos of nothing in particular: "This gate is padlocked."

"Can't you shove through?" suggested Johnnie.

"I don't know that I want to. I think it will be nicer going back by the woods," she answered.

Johnnie looked frankly disappointed.

"If I could get the pony in, we might have gone back together," he said.

"Dainty can find her stable for herself," remarked Maisie; and Johnnie promptly slipped from the saddle and began fastening up the reins.

"Will that be quite all right?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. She'll pick up the other one." Maisie gave a flip to Dainty's hindquarters; and the pony started off at a trot in the wake of her stable companion.

A few minutes later the gateway was deserted and two figures, both in white, the tall one stooping a little, passed slowly up the glade into the softening twilight of the woods.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### THROUGH THE TWILIGHT WOODS.

NEITHER Maisie nor Johnnie appeared to have very much to say after they had left the gate behind them. Johnnie was conscious of no wish to talk. The little cloud which had hung over his spirits had been dispelled at the mere sight of Maisie again. He was content to forget it. He had lit a cigarette a few minutes before, and he now sauntered along by her side, suiting his steps to hers.

Maisie was silent, because her mind had gone back to the subject which had so hurt her feelings previous to her meeting with Johnnie. She could not put away from her the humiliating fact that she had been disapproved of. She had grown accustomed to think she could not fail to amuse and attract, and a certain kind of popularity had fostered her vanity. Popularity is so easily flattered into self-sufficiency; a lonely and very starved and hungry state of being.

"Look out for these ruts! They're rather tricky," said Johnnie, breaking in on her

meditations. "That green bit is a blind. There's a hole there."

He stepped across the track on to surer ground, and held out his hand.

Maisie took the hand, although it was not her way to pose as being helpless. Something in the manner of Johnnie's way of thinking of these ruts gave her an unusual sensation of wanting to confide in some one. Like most people with a keen sense of ridicule, she was always careful never to give the chance of being the one ridiculed. Would Johnnie prove sympathetic or merely laugh? She winced, somehow, at the thought that anything which had hurt her so should be made to appear ridiculous. She was not quite sure what she wanted from Johnnie. Simply to relieve her mind by expressing a grievance was not enough; she was conscious of a craving for something more. She glanced up at him, and was about to speak but changed her mind. Johnnie, after dropping her hand, had thrown away his half-finished a cigarette, and was taking out his case to light another.

"I think you might offer me one," said Maisie, which was certainly not what she had intended to say the moment before.

"Oh!"

Johnnie's "Oh" fell rather blank, for, when

the cigarette case clicked open, there was only one cigarette left in it. He held the case out to her.

"I didn't know you smoked," he said.

Maisie laughed.

"Neither I do! How many times has that cigarette case been filled and emptied to-day?" she asked severely.

"Once or twice," admitted Johnnie.

"Heaps and heaps of times! A great deal too many times."

Maisie put the cigarette case into her pocket, and, as she walked slowly on, she administered a scathing reproof on Johnnie's habit of perpetually having a cigarette in his mouth. It would end in reducing his brains to a sleepy muddle, she affirmed.

She waxed eloquent and very virtuous. Her spirits rose accordingly. To set about sweeping and garnishing Johnnie's morals materially helped to puff the pride of her own. Johnnie was made to understand that the lecture was for his good, but he candidly owned that he could not promise to keep to the abstemious course laid down for him.

"Keep count of every cigarette I smoke in the day! Oh no!" he asserted with decision.

"The fewer you smoke the easier it will be to keep count," retorted Maisie.

Johnnie pondered over this expedient. Enforced pledges, with no proffer of any reward, seemed to him rather one-sided.

"Look here!" he said. "Do you remember that first day at the cottage when the fence broke?"

"When you broke it," corrected Maisie.

Johnnie ignored the interruption.

"I was thinking afterwards about the little donkey shoe. When you hung it on to my heel you said 'It just fits,' and that wasn't kind. You wanted me to give it you back, and I would not until——"

Maisie mimicked the solemnity of his expression. "Until I said that I did not think you were a donkey. Well?"

But Johnnie would not be roused.

"If you let me keep the shoe, I'll promise to try to do what you want."

"Pouf!" Maisie raised her little nose in the air disdainfully. "To be bribed for self-denial does away with all the good. No! That won't do."

They argued the point, with a pretty glancing of the sword, on Maisie's part, till they came to the pine grove. The lines of Maisie's brown army were still unbroken; not one soldier had fallen out of the ranks.



She paused, and stood looking down at the cones. Her flippant mood fell away from her.

"Why did you look surprised when I said you might have offered me a cigarette?" she asked. "Heaps of girls smoke."

"Yes! I know they do," said Johnnie.

"There's no harm in it," persisted Maisie. That she was illogical, in arguing first on one side and then on the other, did not occur to her.

"No—but——" Johnnie hesitated. He was not ready-tongued like Maisie; but if he desired to put a thing into words there was a simplicity in the way he hit the truth which was convincing.

"I was surprised, because I hadn't thought you were that kind of girl." He knit his brows, and tried hard to find a simile to express his meaning. "If I had found you were, it would have made me feel that it didn't matter so much if I were slack myself. Do you see what I mean? It's you girls that set the pace, you know, and it's just in little things that you show us the pace."

Maisie did not answer. She was still looking down, and her lashes hid the expression in her eyes.

"I'm not good at explaining," said Johnnie. "I expect I've made a bungle of it."

But nothing of Johnnie's meaning had been

lost upon Maisie. Beneath the boyishness of expression, he had voiced the same sentiment as had Sunshine. Sunshine had said that Maisie set her own price on herself; Johnnie's words implied a like meaning with an added significance. "It's you girls that set us the pace."

"I never thought of things in that kind of way; I don't think I'd—feel good enough," said Maisie at length in a low voice; and there was an unexpected note of humility running through it.

"Rot!" ejaculated Johnnie. The expression was perhaps inelegant, but the sympathetic manner in which it was uttered redeemed its lack of quality.

Maisie glanced up. "I've just been told by Sunshine that I'm cheap and vulgar," she said. The burst of confidence tumbled out of her mouth rather breathlessly.

Johnnie looked distressed. "I expect she hated saying it."

Having gone so far with her confession, Maisie proceeded to unburden herself.

"I had been saying catty things about Mrs. Yorke. I wouldn't have minded if anyone else had scolded me, but Sunshine!"

Johnnie longed to play the part of consoler.

He knew what he wished to say, but was shy of saying it.

"You see, she's very fond of you," he suggested diffidently. "She wants the best of you. People are jolly lucky when they've got anyone to care enough to want that."

Maisie turned aside with a half sigh, and the subject was allowed to drop.

All the way home she was very silent, but Johnnie felt somehow that it was the silence of sympathy and not of indifference. He saw with regret the grey towers of the old Manor looming through the trees.

"I wish we hadn't to go in," he said. "This has been the nicest part of the day."

Before entering the house Maisie gave him back his cigarette case, without making any allusion to why it had been taken away from him.

"And—you may keep the little donkey-shoe. Hang it up somewhere so that you can always see it," she said.

The clock chimed eight from the belfry tower.

"Remember father's warning," she added. "He marches into the room on the stroke of the half-hour, and looks us over as if we were a pack of hounds. If one's not there, he shouts

‘Half a couple missing,’ and keeps on shouting until the missing half’s whipped in.”

Dinner passed off that evening at the Manor with a geniality which was mainly due to the host. With the exception of Johnnie, it was a family party, and the conversational share of it was borne almost exclusively by the Squire. Maisie, who thought she knew all the peculiarities of her father’s moods, wondered a good deal as she looked on and listened. She had never seen him attracted by any one in quite the same way as he appeared to be with Johnnie. He did not try to shout him down. He treated him with a mixture of tolerance and the consideration due to a man of his own age and standing. More than once, she saw his eyes rest on Johnnie with an expression which touched her in a way she could not account for.

That her father might have depths of sentiment, hidden beneath the brusque noisiness of his outer self, had never been manifested to Maisie. He did not talk about his feelings; and, although she knew well that he was tenaciously proud of his name and of his heritage and his rights as lord of the Manor, she had never thought seriously as to whether her sex might be a disappointment to him or not. He could count his descent in an unbroken line through a long succession of past lords of

the Manor. The broad lands over which he held rule were not entailed exclusively in the male line, but they had never passed into the hands of a woman. Maisie had grown up in the belief that her future was irrevocably bound up with what had always been her home, and the strongest affection she had yet known was love of the soil which had reared her. She had never given consideration to the thought that there might be regret on her father's side that he had no son to carry on his name. As she left the dining-room in the wake of one of Mrs. Yorke's most unbecoming confections, she saw her father put his hand on Johnnie's arm.

"Come along to my den," he said. "I never stop on here."

She had never heard her father give an invitation like that to a guest of Johnnie's age before. Had he feelings which she did not understand? She wondered!

A man who lives at the top of his voice gets sadly little credit for feelings.

## CHAPTER XV.

### SUNSHINE HOLDS A RECEPTION.

THE Squire's liking for Johnnie developed into the monopolising of his society very considerably. Ernest raised no objection. The Squire was an excellent landlord, and as Johnnie, at the moment, was supposed to be going through a course of training to prepare him for the duties of a prospective landed proprietor, he was in the way of picking up a great deal of practical knowledge under favourable circumstances. As Maisie was in the habit of accompanying her father in his early morning rides, and the Squire took upon himself to mount Johnnie, the arrangement appeared to be very pleasant to all concerned.

Johnnie discovered that Maisie was always at her best during these early morning rides. She seldom showed her puzzling or wayward moods to him. She was at home in every farm and cottage on the place, and what was lovable in her nature seemed to be more drawn out by the humble dwellers of the soil than by those with whom she was more intimately associated.

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Just then, she had a personal interest in the visits she paid. She was issuing the invitations for her birthday festivities. From time immemorial the birthday of the heir to the Manor had been kept as a day of universal holiday and feasting. It was exclusively a people's day. There was lavish hospitality and plenty of amusement provided for the rustic population; and a tenants' ball wound up the proceedings at night, the guests including also the household staff and various scattered grades of local society.

Ernest happened to make his appearance at the Manor while tea was in progress, the afternoon preceding the birthday anniversary. The house-party was assembled on the terrace, and the tea-table was set in the shadow of the yew tree. Sunshine's haunt had come to be accepted as a general meeting ground. Mrs. Yorke, who ought to have been at a meeting, had drifted into the circle, and did not seem to know how to get out of it. Johnnie was reclining on the terrace steps with his teacup on the stone slab beside him, and contentedly brooding over a large cake which was slowly losing the rotundity of its figure under his attentions.

The Squire, contrary to his custom, was also present. He had brought *The Times* with him,

and, during the intervals of gulping down his tea, sat on it so as to ensure possession.

Ernest was appealing to Maisie for information as to how he was to comport himself at the ball.

"Who's bringing you to the ball?" asked Maisie. "It all depends on that."

"Bringing me! I thought it was taken for granted that you had asked me to bring myself. Don't you want me?" said Ernest.

Maisie laughed. "You evidently don't know our rules of etiquette. I'm only the birthday figure-head. I give the ball, but each lady invites her own special young man to be her cavalier for the evening. He has to fetch her, and escort her home, and take her in to supper. He must always be there when he's wanted, and never there when he's not wanted."

"And never a flutter on his own?" asked Ernest.

"Certainly not. A cavalier's duty is to carry his lady's cloak; and, when she says 'Cloak me, please,' after a dance, he must always be ready to put it on."

But Ernest would not be suppressed. "Can't you make me a kind of unattached cloak-bearer? I can always pretend I belong to someone."



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"I can't show any favouritism," said Maisie squashingy.

Ernest's face suddenly brightened.

"I shall go and make love to Mrs. Fancy. I shall insist upon her choosing me as her cavalier."

Johnnie, who was carefully cutting a slice of cake so as to keep the sugar icing from cracking off, offered it to Ernest.

"Mrs. Fancy is mine, and I'm giving her a bouquet—red geraniums and maiden hair. She chose it herself," he said.

"You marauding scoundrel!" Ernest accepted the piece of cake. "What am I to do? There's that pretty girl at the shop!"

"Too late; too late," warbled Johnnie. "Franz stormed her heart a week ago. Her fat mother might take you."

"I've always carefully avoided that fat mother," said Ernest. "She's such an industrious gossip. And I haven't even been introduced to her," he added.

"Oh, if you bought a tooth brush from her in the morning that would be introduction enough," said Maisie.

"If it is not against any fixed rule—I always respect rules—I should be very pleased to invite Mr. Muspratt to be my—what is it called?"

Cloak—cloak-holder,” said a voice from the background.

The Squire was seen to bump up out of his chair, and then to bump down again with a crackle on to *The Times*. There was a momentary lull, as several pairs of eyes were concentrated on Ernest, who showed no signs of embarrassment.

He rose and bowed low to Mrs. Yorke.

“Madam, I accept with pleasure. You have done me great honour,” he said.

There was nothing of sarcasm in either his words or attitude. It was meant to be a little piece of graceful comedy, and one and all assailed him with the missiles of their wit. Mrs. Yorke looked rather relieved when he sat down again. Having no sense of humour she was often puzzled as to what people were laughing at, and vaguely uncomfortable as to whether she ought to encourage merriment or not.

The following evening, sometime previous to the hour announced for the opening of the ball, Sunshine had a private reception in the pretty sitting room which had been allotted to her use.

Mrs. Fancy, cavaliered by Johnnie, had arrived early on the scene, and had been left in Sunshine’s care. She was seated on a sofa as close to her beloved little lady as she could possibly squeeze, and clasped tightly in both

hands was the red geranium bouquet. It had given her a secret twinge of jealousy, when first entering the room, to see Sunshine in this new atmosphere. It was the atmosphere to which she belonged. Mrs. Fancy knew that; but the twinge was there all the same. To hide any signs of what she was feeling, she opened the conversation by making flattering comments on Sunshine's appearance.

"Well I must say, as you does look 'earty. If you goes on gettin' much fatter you won't be able to see out o' your eyes. 'Igh livin' I suppose. They'll be folks as kills their own. 'Ome fed is extra nuritious, I've allus been told."

Sunshine knew all about that little twinge. She laid her hand on the folds of the old black silk which Mrs. Fancy had spread out over the seat of the sofa.

"Mrs. Yorke is a great believer in vegetables," she said. "Just the same kind of vegetables as you grow in your garden. And you know I never eat beefsteaks. I don't like them."

Mrs. Fancy beamed, and the twinge felt better.

"Well, I'm not just that wrapped up in meat myself," she remarked jauntily. Her spirits rose. She assumed quite an air of condescen-

sion, as she looked about and took stock of her surroundings. A servant brought in some extra lights, and she regarded them with feigned surprise.

"Lamps! Well now, I should 'ave thought as in a 'ouse of this abilities they would 'ave 'ad incandensing." And she gave a little toss of her chin.

The audibility of her remark was covered by the entrance of Maisie, who swept into the room and made a profound curtsy in front of Mrs. Fancy's sofa. The light fell full upon her, and she made a charmingly pretty picture. Soft white ripply draperies clung about her slender figure and trailed at her feet. Her shapely little head was adorned with no ornament save its own beauty; the only hint of colour about her was a cluster of pink roses tucked into the side of her bodice.

Mrs. Fancy deserted her sofa to walk round Maisie, and made minute investigation into every detail. On the whole she approved, but suggested a locket.

"Did no one think of givin' you a birthday locket?" she enquired, and Maisie confessed that no one had.

Johnnie and Ernest made their appearance while Maisie was still running the fire of Mrs. Fancy's criticism. They had both dressed at

the Manor, as they were to dine and stay the night there. Mrs. Fancy deserted Maisie and began to walk round them. She frankly admitted that she was disappointed.

"But there! When all's said and done there ain't so much to see about a gentleman," she said consolingly.

"We don't matter. Everyone will want to look at you," returned Ernest gallantly.

Mrs. Fancy picked up her red geranium bouquet, and smiled coquettishly at Johnnie over the top of it.

"Well, you'll always know where I am. Red geraniums is strikin'. If I loses myself, I'll just stand up with my bouquet and 'oller out—'Ere am I where are you?'"

The Squire was heard in the distance. The dinner hour had been put forward on account of the ball, and he was adding his own voice to the boom of the gong. Mrs. Yorke had not yet made her appearance, but that did not deter him from marching into the dining-room at the appointed hour.

Mrs. Fancy had been invited to partake of some light refreshment in the housekeeper's room, and when the time came for her to be conducted thither she was a little perturbed in her mind as to the advisability of taking her

bouquet with her or leaving it in Sunshine's care.

"When I gets flustered I sits on things," she explained. "An' that six feet o' black misery, as they calls the Squire's man, 'e's sure to be there lookin' like 'is own corpse. It gives me the frostys every time 'e sets eyes on me."

Finally she decided to take her bouquet with her, and departed.

Sunshine was left to her own thoughts. They were pleasant thoughts. One little touch of feeling on Maisie's part, which she had shown just before leaving the room, lingered in her memory. Maisie had held aloof since that day when such unexpected reproof had fallen from Sunshine's lips, and Sunshine had grieved sorely, doubting whether she had been wise to speak as she had done. Maisie had broken down the barrier of aloofness. She had lingered for a moment after the others had gone, and crossing over to Sunshine's couch had bent over it and whispered:

"Love me again—I can't bear you not to."

The words were very sweet to Sunshine, although she would fain have heard a deeper note stirring through them.

Maisie had expressed no regret, or compunction; there was no stretching out towards the wish for better things. She wanted to be loved

again; she could not bear the idea of being put in the wrong. That was the burden of her plea.

A fumbling at the door handle warned Sunshine whom she might expect to see enter. Mrs. Yorke never came into a room with confidence. She never seemed to know where to look for the door handle, and generally fumbled for it at the wrong side of the door. She was not yet dressed for dinner, and she stood irresolute on the threshold.

"I thought everyone was here," she said.

"They've gone in to dinner," answered Sunshine. Something in the solitariness of the figure standing in the doorway made her heart ache. It prompted an inspiration.

"Won't you dine here with me? Just we two together. Do! I should like it so much."

Mrs. Yorke advanced with rather a weary step. She looked tired, and there was a shadowy softness about her eyes which gave her usually expressionless features a something of appeal. She was a woman whose colouring was extraordinarily influenced by the manner of light which was thrown upon it. She possessed that peculiarly Russian type of skin which is opaquely yellow by day and luminous by night. The strong glow of the lamp revealed these possibilities.

"I wish she would let me dress her," murmured Sunshine. "I should so love to give them all a surprise."

Preparations had been made for Sunshine's evening meal, and Mrs. Yorke's eyes alighted on the table, ready laid. She woke up to an unwonted decision of manner; and moving over to the fireplace, rang the bell.

"I shall dine here to-night," she said to the servant who answered it. "Please send a message to the dining-room to say so."

What transpired at that tête-a-tête dinner Sunshine never revealed; but when later Mrs. Yorke entered the drawing-room, as the coffee was being handed round after dinner, she created a sensation which was unusual. The Squire was the first to become aware of his wife's presence. He stopped short with a stutter in the middle of a shout, and no one heard the end of the sentence.

Maisie looked, and then looked again; her eyes narrowed a little, and she murmured under her breath 'Sunshine.'

Mrs. Yorke, for once, had succeeded in being impressive. The curious pallor of her skin was intensified to an almost dazzling whiteness by the dead black of her gown, which was not remarkable in any way except for its effect of cloudy softness as a background. The colour-



less hair, of a dead leaf hue, instead of being tightly drawn back from her forehead, was coiled coronet fashion above her brows, its very colourlessness adding a passive note of harmony. She had an unbecoming habit of poking forward her chin when she entered a room. On this occasion a diamond collar encircled her throat. It made her hold her head up, and gave her a certain stateliness of carriage.

The Squire took up his favourite position on the hearthrug and watched his wife in silence. The diamond collar had been his own gift. Maisie was also silent, but it was the terribly observant silence of that criticism of the eye alone, which alert youth can make so embarrassing.

Ernest was the only one of the party to behave quite naturally. Spying some evening wraps which had been arranged on a couch by the door he suggested that, as cloak-bearer to his hostess, he should be allowed to choose the cloak he was to have the honour of carrying. Johnnie took exception to his choice, and a little wrangle ensued. Ernest appealed to Mrs. Yorke. It was one of those apparently meaningless trifles which bubble up spontaneously out of nothing.

The sensation of finding herself the centre of anything so frivolous was a unique experience

to Mrs. Yorke. She was a little afraid of it, and yet conscious of being gratified.

Ernest gained his point regarding the cloak.

"I expect it's about time to put it on," he said. "I see the Squire looking at his watch."

Only Ernest heard the muttered exclamation of the master of the house as he passed out of the room. The Squire had found an explanation for himself.

"It's that thing round her neck. Good as a bearing rein."

## CHAPTER XVI.

### MAISIE'S BIRTHDAY BALL.

A CERTAIN amount of formality, in accordance with past precedent, marked the opening of Maisie's birthday ball. Etiquette necessitated the Squire's leading out the principal lady. She invariably happened to be stout and breathless, and for days beforehand was wont to live in dread of the ordeal before her. The Squire's idea of dancing was a species of wild steeple chase, and by the time he had landed his partner on the boards, he had completely forgotten whether she had two legs or four.

On this occasion he appeared in exceptionally good spirits. The intricacies of a figure cannoning him into Mrs. Fancy, with a force of impact which sent the geranium bouquet flying he actually stopped to pick it up, and returned it to its owner, with a "Huntin' pink, eh!" the sporting allusion delighting Mrs. Fancy beyond words.

Mrs. Fancy was enjoying the ball with such transparent joyousness, that she distributed the radiance of her good spirits on all around her

Even the six foot of black misery expanded into garrulousness under her influence.

"If you talks so much when you're dancin' you won't have nothin' to say when you sits down," was a remark, which Johnnie over-hearing, took to heart. If his lady of the evening was not only meaning to tread a measure with her swains but to sit out with them afterwards, his duties of cloak-bearer would fall easily. He propped himself up against a door-post and concentrated his attention on watching Maisie.

Dance followed dance. When the music stopped, the partners separated and drifted towards the four sides of the room, like as when a spring breeze blows a cloud of falling petals against an encircling bank. Sometimes, an isolated figure might be seen sitting in self-conscious loneliness; and Ernest, who like Johnnie, had found that nothing special was required of him, felt pitifully inclined towards these solitary ones. He wondered if he might risk a repulse, and introduce a little pleasant conversation without being thought intrusive. One lady, in particular, he noticed, had never left her seat, and she was wearing a pink cloak trimmed with bugles. The fact that she was wearing her cloak rather pointed to the conclusion that she had not a cloak-bearer of her own.

"I'll risk it," he decided, and seated himself on one of the frosty spaces which extended on either side of the pink cloak. He had not seen the lady's face, but her loneliness had appealed to his sympathies.

He gave a little preliminary cough. He would enlist her pity, he thought, to begin with.

"Do talk to me," he said ingenuously. "I don't know a soul here."

It was to the lady of the sticky past to whom he had unwittingly offered his society; and as she turned to look at him he was conscious of not only being looked at but looked through.

"This is not what I expected," he murmured. The face turned towards him was plentifully besprinkled with pearl powder, and a lemon-coloured wig was perched at an angle which almost hid the line of the brow. Ernest noticed these things in passing; but what interested him most were the eyes which regarded him from under the elaborately curled hair. They were curiously cautious eyes, but they did not shrink from observation, and there was a certain humorous defiance in their steadfastness.

Ernest decided not to venture upon any further unconventionalities. He made some trivial comments on the character of the ball and the significance of the occasion.

"Pleasing to find that the good old patriar-

chal sentiment—one might almost call it feudalism—has not yet quite died out,” he remarked.

“All very well for the man on the top,” answered the lady crushingly.

Ernest felt his heart warm towards the speaker. That his banal platitude should have drawn such a retort was encouraging.

“Certainly,” he agreed. “When one comes to think of it there are so few left to sit on the top. The old lot had a trick of gambling away their last shirts after a fashion that didn’t leave their descendants much to——”

Ernest felt that his companion’s eyes regarded him quizzically.

“Sit on the top in,” she added before he had time to finish his sentence. She kept looking at him and then remarked casually:

“I like your face.” Ernest laughed outright.

“That’s consoling,” he said. “It’s the only one I’ve got, you see.”

A slight commotion was heard issuing from the direction of a doorway which had just been opened into the refreshment room. The noise swelled in volume, and the Squire’s voice was distinguishable, intermingled with that of Franz, Herr Becker. Franz and his partner, a blushing young person with a buxom figure,

were blocking the entrance; a position they could not avoid as a crowd hemmed them in on either side. The block would have annoyed the Squire under any circumstances; but something in the self-sufficiency of the little German in having appropriated the position added to his annoyance.

"Hi there, you hairdresser. Get out of the way," he stormed.

"I am not a hairdresser," answered Franz with dignity.

"Well then, you fool that looks like a hairdresser."

But Franz was not to be so easily disposed of. He had donned his *festa* clothes for the occasion, and felt that he merited attention. A blue frock coat, tightly buttoned upwards from the waist, disclosed just sufficient shirt front to show that it was elaborately embroidered in a design of edelweiss, and his hair was brushed on end like the bristles of a scrubbing brush. Being conscious that he possessed a presence, he refused to be intimidated.

"I wish to carry this lady into eatings, but the approach is difficult," he explained loftily.

An ominous growl, of—"Go to blazes with your eatings. If you don't move on I'll make you," was the answer to this preferred piece of condescension.

An odd sound like the cluck of a pleased hen made Ernest aware that his lady of the pink cloak was enjoying this piece of by-play.

"Nice little bit of patriarchal feudalism," she remarked over her shoulder.

A break in the crowd relieved the pressure round the doorway, and Franz and his partner were shot through and vanished. Ernest's lady gave a twitch to the pink cloak, which was slipping from her shoulders, and leant back against the bench. She did not volunteer any further comment on what had just taken place, but sat smoothing the backs of her gloves.

Ernest cast about for a new subject of conversation.

"I feel rather a fraud to-night," he said. "I'm supposed to be here on duty, but no one seems to want to make use of me."

"Well, you've cheered me up," remarked the lady, who was still smoothing the backs of her gloves. "I was beginning to want a little cheering up. I'm just a looker-on. I belong to Mrs. Yorke's ambulance corps; and, well—that's why I'm here."

"Lookers-on see a lot," said Ernest sententiously.

"They see through a lot," was the answer. "They see skeletons in cupboards and shoes on the wrong feet. They see sinners tricking



themselves out in haloes, and saints taking the wrong side of the road."

The speaker laughed. It was not a bitter laugh; it was a laugh of comprehension—a putting at its own value the worth of a knowledge which experience had proved.

"Do you think I look on out of inquisitiveness?" she questioned the next moment.

Ernest prevaricated. "Do you know I don't find people inquisitive," he said. "Most of them are so much more anxious to talk than to listen."

"Ah, well, that depends! I'm thinking of the lookers-on point of view," answered the lady. "You see, you're in the set with the feudal patriarchs, but I'm not. All the same, I'm in things that you're not. I said just now that I belonged to Mrs. Yorke's ambulance corps. Well, I run the show for her. Nobody knows—she doesn't know herself. It's the only one of her schemes that's a success." She lowered her voice slightly. "Why do I do it?"

Ernest was at a loss how to answer. Was a mystery about to be revealed to him, or was the lady merely cultivating the eccentric?

"I can only suggest that it's because you've got a kind heart," he ventured at length.

"It's because she's got the kind of heart

that's no more use to her than a baby's rattle would be to a policeman."

Ernest was given a quick sidelong glance.

"I expect you're putting me down as a queer sort. Don't try to place me by my looks. I wear a wig because I'm as bald as a coot. I've always had a fancy for golden hair, so, when the chance came, I didn't see why I shouldn't have the colour I liked. I've worn powder ever since I scalded my face playing tricks with a spirit-lamp. And—am I giving you shocks?" she broke off to enquire.

"I am exceedingly interested," answered Ernest. But the lady's flow of confidence seemed suddenly to run dry.

"That's all," she said abruptly.

But Ernest really was interested. He led the conversation back to the simile of the kind heart and the baby's rattle.

"Mrs. Yorke is perhaps one of those who don't let their kind-heartedness be enough appreciated," he said.

The spangled shoulder was slowly turned towards him, and there was a renewal of friendliness in the voice which answered.

"Yes, that's it; but few find out. I'll tell you how I found out. I came here to these parts. Well, I just came! No one took any notice of me, I didn't expect they would, but

every dog likes its bone, and she—Mrs. Yorke I mean—she didn't throw a bone at me, but she gave me one to pick up for myself. See?"

"The bone?" asked Ernest diffidently.

"Tut, tut now. No poking fun at me! It was at a bazaar. I didn't know her. I was just trifling round to pass the time, and she was trying to add up an account. She can't do figures, and I love counting. I pressed close up and whispered, 'Seven and sixpence from ten shillings leaves two and sixpence!' She never questioned—she took my word for it. There was a little stool handy inside the curtains of her stall, and would you believe it? I sat on that stool the whole day, and kept the cash box for her. Not many people would trust a stranger, and judging by appearances mind you, with the key of a bazaar cash box! Now, would they?"

"I certainly have never been trusted with one," admitted Ernest.

"Well, I have!" said the lady triumphantly. "And that began it. Nobody knows. Nobody knows anything. They're all as blind as owls."

She half-shut her eyes, and looked at Ernest meditatively. "Can you keep secrets?" she asked.

Ernest did not wish to be the recipient of secrets. Perhaps he showed his uncertainty,

for the lady gathered her cloak about her and glanced in the direction of the refreshment room door.

"I wonder if there's any tea left?" she said. "It's thirsty work sitting in the dust that other people kick up."

Ernest rose with alacrity and offered her his arm. She stood up, but did not at once accept it. She looked round the ball-room, as though balancing in her mind something of which she alone understood the meaning. All the numerous signs and tokens, significant of the occasion, led up to one central interest. Maisie was the pivot round which it all revolved, and to-night she had entered with new dignity into the heritage of her birthright. This was the first occasion on which she had held her birthday ball with her butterfly wings spread free from their chrysalis husk. She smiled on all, and dispensed her favours impartially; but there was a difference between this anniversary and the ones which had gone to make up the tale of the past. She was the future lady of the Manor that night.

"Have you ever danced on pie-crust?" asked Ernest's companion. Her exhaustive survey of the room had ceased.

"I've never been rash enough to imagine I could," said Ernest.

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“Well! The moral’s pretty much the same as that of Humpty Dumpty.”

The lady took the arm which had been patiently waiting for her.

“It was nice of you to come and talk to me,” she said. “I was getting tired of looking on. My name is Slippington—Mrs. Slippington. It’s quite an easy name to remember, but, of course, you don’t need to consider this an introduction. It’s just been a passing of the time. Now! I shall be very glad of a cup of tea”; and Ernest found himself being gently inclined towards the refreshment room.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### “FLOWERS ALLUS FADES ON FLIRTS.”

JOHNNIE did not move very far from his position by the doorway during the early part of the evening. When Maisie, at intervals, upbraided him for laziness, his answer was always to the effect that he was keeping an eye on Mrs. Fancy.

The ceremonious part of the ball ended with the opening of the supper-room; after that was over, it was the custom of the house-party to retire from the scene. An elastic license was allowed to the guests to keep up the ball till the early hours of the morning.

Johnnie detached himself from his door-post when he saw that assiduous cavaliers were preparing to take their dancing companions in to supper, and he proceeded in search of Mrs. Fancy. He found her suffering a little reaction from the excitement of her social success. She was persuaded to join the procession wending its way into the supper room, but, when there, Johnnie found her a trifle captious and difficult to please.

"The truth is I'm gettin' 'ome-sick for my cat," she confided to him, waving aside a luscious-looking sweet which was commended to her notice. "Well, as you're so pressin', just a mite o' that pink jelly on the top. It's decorations, I know, but there! It'll tumble into the next 'elpin', so I may as well 'ave it. After that I think I'll be goin'."

"You'll miss half the show," remonstrated Johnnie.

"I've 'ad enough," said Mrs. Fancy with delightful candour. "An' there's my cat! They're company of a evenin', is cats. They plays about. It'll be feelin' lonesome."

"Oh, no, it won't. It'll be catching mice in the dark."

An alarmed expression crossed Mrs. Fancy's face.

"Will it be pitchy dark goin' 'ome?" she asked. "I've got to go a bit down Fairy Lane. I ain't afraid of ghosties, but fairies! I allus goes slant-indicularways across the road when I comes to Fairy Lane."

Johnnie assured her that when they came to Fairy Lane he would hold her arm very firm, and, the mite of pink jelly having been disposed of and the remains of the red geranium bouquet retrieved from under the table, she pushed

aside her chair, and announced that she was ready to go.

The cool of the night was grateful after the palpitating heat of the ball-room, and Johnnie had no intention of going back to the ball.

He took his return route leisurely. Fairy Lane had been traversed in haste, with Mrs. Fancy's plump arm clinging to his; but, when he passed through it again on his homeward way, he lingered. There was a mysterious sweetness in its gloom. The gossamer-winged denizens of another world seemed to hover above and around him, caressing the air with their fairy fingers and wafting the balm of the night scents against his cheek. There was no moon, but the starlit sky gave him light sufficient to guide him on his way.

Johnnie's mind ought to have been full of serenity, but a very small thing had ruffled him. At parting, Mrs. Fancy had held up the red geranium bouquet for inspection:

"Dead as dead! Didn't I tell you as flowers allus fades on flirts."

Johnnie argued with himself. Such a ridiculous piece of old wives' nonsense! "Flowers allus fades on flirts." But he could not help his mind recurring to the former occasion when Mrs. Fancy had made the same remark. She had included Maisie in the



category of flower vampires. He wished he had never heard the absurd saying, for he had given Maisie the bunch of pink roses which she had worn all evening.

"What a silly ass I am," he kept telling himself, as he took his way across the paddock after crossing the stile. He would never know whether Maisie's roses had shared the fate of Mrs. Fancy's bouquet or not. The Manor party would all have gone to bed before he got back. What was the use of worrying?

Under the heavy foliage of the trees within the park railings he had to grope his way. The night was so still that even the snapping of a twig sounded alarmingly loud, and when he emerged into the open, and the line of the terrace came into view, he saw that the house was already in darkness. Not a light showed from even the upper windows, and he reflected that the servants' quarters would also be locked up. Everyone would be at the ball. He had either been forgotten, or it had been taken for granted that he had stayed on at the ball.

He paused at the foot of the terrace steps, undecidedly. The summer nights were so short, he had half a mind to spend the remainder of the time on one of the numerous lounge chairs under the old yew tree. He mounted the steps, and then stood on the top blinking at

something he saw there. Had one of the haunters of Fairy Lane flitted on before him? This thing of airy lightness had stolen a march on the dawn, when fairies must needs cast their magic ere the dewdrops melt with the mists of morning.

"Have I given you a fright?" whispered the fairy softly, and Johnnie emboldened, drew near.

"It really is you," he said, and sat down on the step.

Maisie, after that first whisper, lapsed into a silence which was so unlike her that Johnnie began to doubt again as to her reality. Under cover of the darkness, he stretched out a hand towards the soft folds of filmy white that lay along the ledge of the old grey steps.

"I'm real!" said Maisie; and she turned her head.

"How did you know that I thought you were not? You couldn't have felt me touch you."

"I did. And—I didn't."

Maisie spoke as though she were questioning her own veracity.

"I feel funny to-night somehow, as though I were knowing everything by touch. I'm touchy all over. Not in a humpy way—I don't mean that. But as if something inside me was

painfully awake. I can't put a name to it. Have you ever felt like that?"

Johnnie could not read her expression, only the outline of her profile was clear; and Maisie's profile was not suggestive of the mystical. Yet something of the uncanny seemed to have taken possession of her for the moment, and Johnnie was wishful to humour her mood.

"I was once chaffed into sleeping in a room with a ghost," he announced. "There was a ghost of sorts mouching about. I opened the door and tried to kick it out, and something went beetling down the stairs for all it was worth. I felt jolly creepy."

Maisie shook her head.

"That's not the kind of creepiness I mean. Listen! It came on at the ball—my feeling. I loved the first part of the ball. I felt so—oh, as if I floated above everything. You can't understand it, of course. Things like that don't mean anything to a man. I felt that I looked so nice, and was so nice, and that everyone thought so. I could see it reflected in the faces round me. You see, I belong to these people, and they feel they have a kind of proprietary right in me. I expect this all sounds rather ridiculous and simply conceit, but I don't think it did any harm because it made me want to make myself charming to everyone.

Then, without any reason, a kind of sadness began to oppress me. Wherever I looked, the faces which had smiled at me appeared to be shadowed by a new expression. Something in their eyes was unfamiliar. It puzzled me. I was sad; but they were only sorry. Sorry, with a little pity in the feeling. What could it mean? It was all imagination, of course, but I felt getting miserabler and miserabler. Did I look as though I were?"

"No! But, then, I was mostly thinking about—you looked awfully pretty," said Johnnie.

Maisie took no notice of the ending of his sentence. She continued, still in the same harking-back manner of speech.

"At the end when it came to be the time for father and the rest of us to go away, I could hardly bear to hear all the good-nights and listen to the happy-return speeches, and the things they always say about next time, and the years to come, and all that. It used to amuse me, but to-night——"

She broke off. "That's why I'm sitting out here."

She raised her face, and her lips parted, and she breathed deep and long. From every sleeping flower the night dews were stealing fragrance. Not a leaf stirred in the stillness;

the hush of a waiting quiet seemed to brood over the land.

“I so love it all,” she murmured under her breath.

Johnnie sat quite still, watching what he could see of her in the dusk. Presently she moved; and then, without any leading up to the subject, she said with an attempt at indifference:

“I’m going away.”

“Going away!” repeated Johnnie, only half comprehending.

“Going away for—oh quite a long time.”

Only then did Johnnie take in her meaning. A sharp note of reproach crept into his voice:

“You never told me you were going away. Why didn’t you?”

“Because I don’t want to go,” answered Maisie quickly. “It was all arranged ages ago, and I hate having plans made for me. It won’t be a bit amusing. A round of duty visits. Father says I must! The ‘Family’ want to sample me. They’ve never troubled about me before. I shall be trotted out and criticised and disapproved of probably. I shall have to make the round of the whole lot or else there will be ructions. It will take months! I shan’t be home till cubbing’s half over.”

Johnnie's heart sank. "As long as that! I shall miss you—awfully badly."

"I shall miss you," owned Maisie frankly.

"Not half so much as I shall you." Johnnie did not know what inward pang of fear made him blurt out abruptly: "You won't come back the same."

Maisie flamed up. "What nonsense!" she retorted.

"You won't come back the same," reiterated Johnnie.

"I shall come back exactly the same," declared Maisie. "I shall plague and tease and worry you, and make you hate me every five minutes."

"I've never hated you. You've plagued and teased and worried me into—loving you."

Johnnie spoke so quietly that his voice did not seem to have any feeling. But the light answer which rose to Maisie's lips died unspoken.

She put out her hand impulsively.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I've often been horrid to you—I'm sorry!"

But Johnnie did not take the proffered hand; it savoured too much of good-comradeship. A bloodless proceeding. It would not quicken his pulses by a heart-beat.

"I'm an idiot of course, but I just am an

idiot. I know you don't feel about it as I do. It wouldn't be any good trying to make you. I love you when you're nice to me, and I love you a dozen times more when you're horrid. There! That's every bit true. It's all been just play to you; but it hasn't to me."

Johnnie's phraseology had nothing to recommend it except its sincerity. Maisie had never had a confession of love made to her; but the arresting note, which has but the one interpretation for all time, and which will ring down the ages, so long as love is the light of life, spoke to her in Johnnie's voice as clearly as though he had wrapt his meaning in the imagery of a poet's dream. Yet, although she knew that he was in earnest, and that, however quietly he spoke, the emotion under which he was labouring hurt him by its strength, his words left her cold. He had not stirred in her any answering depth of feeling. She felt unmoved—impatient almost. Her life had been lived in the shallows: the shallows of self. She had never been brought face to face with the problem of individual responsibility. That she could, apart from her will, be a vital force in the life of another was a shackling of her freedom. She was herself. She belonged to herself.

"I've vexed you," said Johnnie. "You didn't understand, or you wouldn't have gone

on doing the things to make me care until—it came to this.”

The prickings of a conscience not quite easy stung Maisie. The dallyings of the past few weeks had not had for their object the purpose of making Johnnie hate her. To play with him one minute and thwart him the next, to invent tea-cup storms out of nothing and make peace out of less, had given a piquancy to life which she had enjoyed very much. Why could not Johnnie be content to leave things as they were? She did not intend to reproach, but she sought to vindicate herself, and she turned his own accusation against himself.

“You said just now that I should be changed when I came back; but it is you that have begun to change before I have ever gone away.”

“I haven’t changed,” said Johnnie. “I’ve only spoken out. If things had been going to slip along as they were, I shouldn’t. It’s like this. I love you, and it’s only play to you. You don’t understand what I feel, and you won’t until you find out for yourself what it means.”

Maisie’s voice sounded a little defiant.

“I don’t see why you should say such odd things to me,” she exclaimed.

“Will you promise me something?” asked Johnnie, and, without waiting for her answer,



he continued: “Promise that when you’re away, you won’t flirt with anyone the way you’ve flirted with me.”

He had not meant to put his point so bluntly. Maisie’s wrath blazed forth:

“How dare you say I flirt! I’ve never——” She was about to add, “I’ve never had the chance,” but she turned the sentence into mockery. It was very kind of Johnnie to be so considerate for the feelings of her next victim.

“I don’t care a blow about his feelings. I was thinking about myself,” said Johnnie. “I shall keep on bothering about what you’re doing. Do promise.”

But Maisie would not promise. She scoffed at the idea of anything so ridiculous requiring a promise. Her whole attitude betokened determination. Johnnie must not be encouraged to make demands and exact conditions.

“I’m sorry you think I’m a flirt,” she said. “You seemed to have taken that for granted, and not troubled to find out whether I was playing, or——”

“Not trouble to try and find out!” Johnnie, usually so slow of action, sprang to his feet. Maisie had unwittingly given him his chance, and the masterfulness of the man was for the moment uppermost. He looked as though he were going to catch her up in his arms and run

away with her. Without pausing to gather up her draperies, she rose precipitately, to flee for the nearest refuge. The train of her dress entangled her feet, and a tightness like swathed bandages girded her knees. She had tripped and fallen before she was half-way across the terrace. Johnnie was the victor; but he was generous in his hour of triumph. If there was an apparent bungling in helping Maisie to rise, it was because there was not enough light for him to see what he was doing. Her head rested against his shoulder for quite half a minute, while her shoe was being disentangled from the wisps of chiffon which had twisted round it. If her hair touched his lips, he could not be blamed. A faint perfume hung about it, like that which had fanned his cheek as he passed through Fairy Lane. It made him feel a little dizzy.

The ignominy which had attended on her flight had subdued Maisie effectually.

"Good night," she said in a very small voice, when she found herself standing within the doorway which had afforded her exit a short time previously. She raised her finger warningly. "Don't make a noise when you come in, and lock the door behind you. There's a candle on the hall table." The next moment she had vanished.

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Johnnie waited for a moment to see if anything further would happen. He moved back to look up at the house, and his foot pressed on something which yielded with a soft squash. He stooped and picked up the thing on which he had trodden. An hour or two ago it had been a bunch of pink roses, fresh with the life blood of living bloom. He sighed as he slipped the thing into his pocket. Just a tired little heap of bruised petals. It still retained its scent, giving even more generously of itself in its anguish than it had done in the pride of its beauty.

“I trod on it, blundering fool,” he murmured. And the reflection comforted him. He was not to know what it had been like before his foot had crushed it on to the flagged pavement.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### JOHNNIE IS SET A TASK.

A FEW days after the completion of the birthday festivities, Maisie left the Manor to pay her round of visits. She had declared to Johnnie that she hated going away; but there was a certain novelty in the excitement of this new departure. To anyone as untried as Maisie, the mystery of the unknown held a subtle lure. Unconsciously, all her faculties were on the alert for what might be in store for her.

The ballast which she took with her, in this first flight into the big world, was not very weighty, although it took up the square room of a goodly number of smart new trunks, and a smart new maid had been engaged to guardian the trunks. Maisie had superintended all her own arrangements, and she had shown a pretty taste in the matter of frocks and frills. She had not consulted Mrs. Yorke, and Mrs. Yorke had not resented being set aside. Clothes did not interest her. The Squire, having laid down the law as to the order of going, made no demur as to how she carried out her programme.

Several days passed uneventfully, before it was borne in upon the Squire that an interest, which had of late crept in to his daily rounds, was missing. Johnnie came no more to the Manor. His comings and goings had recently been taken for granted. One day seemed invariably to open up plans for the next. The Squire's liking for Johnnie had gone deeper than a mere fancy, and, in his pottering rounds to the outlying portions of the Manor lands, it had brought a keener enjoyment into his rides to feel that he was instilling the lessons of his own experience into a receptive mind. The Squire in his own autocratic way was a just landlord. He did not allow his agent unlimited authority, and liked to superintend details himself. He missed Johnnie, and he worked himself up to the conclusion that he had a right to him and to command his services.

Happening one day to come upon Ernest in the vicinity of Fairy Lane, he hailed him with a loud "Hi!" -

Ernest was some distance off, contemplating the difficulties of a high hedge, with the intention of making a detour across country, and, turning, he recognised the shouter. A hot stretch of road lay between him and the Squire, who was mounted, and Ernest was not. He waved a hand in friendly acknowledgment.

The Squire bustled his fat cob over the ground. He was full of an idea which had come to him, and as usual was in a hurry to express it.

"Look here!" he said, pulling up. "Would you like to turn that Johnnie boy of yours on to a job?"

"It depends on himself," answered Ernest guardedly.

"That's good enough," said the Squire. "It's that cottage! The one the fire nearly burnt out. I want to get it set to rights, and the old woman there—what's her name, Nancy Chancy! She's as obstinate as a pig. The place has got to be put to rights, and put to rights in the way I want. I'll be hanged if she'll listen to a word I say."

"Dear, dear," ejaculated Ernest. "I have always found her most affable, and she loves Johnnie."

"That's it! I want to make use of Johnnie."

"I see!" said Ernest musingly.

"Where can I lay hands on the boy?" And the Squire jerked the cob's rein impatiently.

But Ernest was not to be hurried.

"Johnnie may be anywhere. Shall I make an appointment with him to meet you?"

"Send him over to the cottage this afternoon.

I'll meet him there at five o'clock"; and with a nod over his shoulder the Squire passed on.

"Good business," remarked Ernest to himself. "Johnnie's condition is becoming serious. Twilight moonings and cigarettes on half rations. Dear lad, it's educating, but if overdone might lead to inertia."

Ernest's eyes twinkled. "Mrs. Fancy, and the Squire and Johnnie! If only my conscience would approve of eavesdropping how exceedingly I should enjoy the meeting this afternoon."

The Squire kept the hour of his appointment to the minute, and he fumed wrathfully when, on his arrival, he could see no signs of Johnnie. Nor was Mrs. Fancy visible. He did not go inside the doors, but made a tour of the little place and its surroundings. When he came to the back premises he stood and scowled at what he saw there. The front view of the cottage, with its arched eaves, and thatched roof projecting over the latticed windows, presented a charming picture to the passer-by, and although the fire had smirched its rustic beauty, it could be restored to its previous freshness. But the back of the cottage was reminiscent of the vagrant tastes and habits of its squatter ancestry. A collection of tumbled-down little huts huddled round a cobbled yard from which the

back door opened. A forlorn-looking pump was falling to pieces in one corner; and the coals and Mrs. Fancy's wash tubs were secreted in dark corners, where the footing was dangerous even in the daylight.

It was over the matter of sweeping away the old order of things and substituting new, that the Squire and Mrs. Fancy had come to differ. The Squire commanded that the back-yard was to be rebuilt; Mrs. Fancy stoutly maintained that she did not want strange new buildings.

"I knows that I knows what I'm doin'," she protested. "I don't want a noo back-yard. It would give me a fit o' nervous debilities if I was 'avin' to keep on thinkin' whether I was feelin' for my coal shovel or the pump 'andle."

The Squire was not accustomed to having his orders flouted. As he moved about, thrusting the end of a stick first through one piece of rotten boarding and then through another, he anathematized the fire audibly for having taken the good and left the bad. On making his way round to the front of the cottage again, he came upon Mrs. Fancy and Johnnie sauntering through the wicket gate from the direction of the common.

They appeared to be engaged in pleasant converse. Johnnie saluted the Squire gravely, and Mrs. Fancy dropped him a curtsy.



The Squire's gaze went past Mrs. Fancy to something which trailed on the ground behind her. One end of a tether was wound round her arm, but she was paying no heed to what was at the other end of it.

The Squire pointed.

"I suppose you know that you're dragging an empty collar behind you," he remarked grimly.

"My cat!" exclaimed Mrs. Fancy in sudden consternation, and she hurried back through the gateway.

The Squire looked at Johnnie.

"Got my message?"

"Yes, Sir," said Johnnie.

The Squire drew from his pocket a long blue envelope.

"Here's a plan of what I want done. The building——"

Johnnie expostulated. "But I don't know anything about building; I couldn't build a pig-stye!"

"Time you learnt. But that don't matter. The men know their business. It's this old woman! She won't let them nigh the place. 'Pon my word, I've a mind to give her the sack. I would, if it weren't for little Miss Sunshine."

"You won't turn Mrs. Fancy out! She's a dear," said Johnnie.

"Well, then, you take the job"; and the Squire thrust the blue envelope into Johnnie's hand. Mrs. Fancy was seen returning nursing in her arms the white cat.

"Poaching devil," said the Squire, addressing the cat.

"My Daisy White a poacher! Indeed an' she ain't," protested Mrs. Fancy indignantly.

The point of the Squire's riding-whip travelled slowly to the incriminating tether. "Why do you tie her up then?"

"That ain't for tyin' her up, it's for takin' her out for exercise. You don't suppose I'm goin' to chance my Daisy White bein' eat up by wild animals?"

"Well, then, see that she keeps her head in her collar. My keepers have orders to shoot stray cats as vermin."

The Squire had unconsciously used the most powerful weapon he could wield for the subduing of Mrs. Fancy. The mere mention of shooting cats under any circumstances gained for him a submissive hearing. When Mrs. Fancy discovered that Johnnie was to superintend the building operations, she turned round like a weather-cock and threw herself heart and soul into the new schemes.

"Every one of these huts has to go, mind!"

said the Squire, confronting her ruthlessly with the dilapidation of her back-yard.

Mrs. Fancy's eyes were already accustoming themselves to visions of future glory.

"I'll get over missin' 'em once they're gone," she said, with a heartlessness which was not altogether assumed. She did not even sigh as she moved away. "I'll get over missin' 'em once they're gone," she repeated. "And there! When all's said and done, wot the eye don't see, the 'art don't grieve."

Johnnie stayed on at the cottage after the Squire had left, and he spent a good deal of time in the old unused part of it which Maisie was wont to call the donkey stable. The place was so strongly identified with Maisie that he could almost feel her actual presence near him. It was through the broken lattice of the western window that the sunlight had shone on her hair, when she had sat curled up on the ledge and told him its history. Above his head loomed the dark line of the goose roost. He remembered the story of the taming of the robins, and how she had made use of the goose roost to reach their nest amongst the rafters. The episode of his annexing the little donkey-shoe had taken place on the very spot where he was standing. There was the nail in the beam,

from which it had hung. Life had seemed very dull and aimless to Johnnie since Maisie left; everything appeared to have lost its savour.

He pulled himself together, and for the first time he realised that the Squire's proposition was not a farce but a something that might be made very interesting. Maisie loved the cottage, and especially this quaint old bit of it. When he was at work, he would have the feeling that she was near him. She had often puzzled him by her moods; but her whims and vagaries, and the little tyrannies she had exercised over him had been the attraction that kept him at her side, and he missed all that out of his daily life. Here, he could associate her with everything he was doing, and there would be nothing to fret and worry. That little donkey-shoe, of which he now had possession, had been the first linking up of a two-fold chain. Perhaps he would give it back to her some day; but only on his own terms.

The Squire had done even a better day's work than he knew. He had given Johnnie an interest, and an interest with an object. Lavender silk socks and immaculate clothes came to be discarded. Breeches and gaiters, shirt sleeves when it was hot, and hobnails when the ground was puddled into a quagmire took their place.

By the time Johnnie had started smoking a pipe, Ernest felt that he might rejoice in safety.

“Little Miss Maisie won’t find him so easy to play with when she comes back; but she’ll like him better,” he told himself.

Ernest kept a kindly place in his heart for Maisie. The spontaneous quickness of her vitality attracted him as it had attracted Johnnie, and he realised that there was just as much to discover in Maisie as there was in Johnnie.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### MRS. YORKE TELLS HER NEWS.

It was the beginning of August when Johnnie commenced his work of restoring the thatched cottage. For the first week everything he did was personally supervised by the Squire, and he did not realise how hampering this supervision was until the Squire's presence was removed.

Two days before the Twelfth, the Squire and his guns and the six feet of black misery, who, apart from his ordinary duties, acted as loader and general factotum when occasion required, took their departure for the moors.

It was an annual migration, a men's party exclusively, and the quartette who composed it took their business seriously. The Squire never wrote letters when he was away. If urgency compelled him to communicate with his family, the procedure took the form of a telegraphic bark. When he left the Manor behind him, he vanished for the time being into space.

"I ain't sorry 'e's gone," commented Mrs.

Fancy with satisfaction. "I can't do with bein' 'ustled. My legs feels just like feathers since 'e's took himself off." And, to verify her statement, she tripped lightly up a ladder which was resting against her kitchen wall, and commenced a vigorous onslaught on the brass of her curtain rods.

Johnnie became more and more interested in his work as it progressed. Every evening he reported himself at the Manor to talk over with Sunshine what he had done. Sunshine was vitally concerned in all that appertained to the cottage; but, apart from her own concern, she made Johnnie feel that nothing could possibly be done without him. It was not a cramping exactitude which restrained his enterprise. It opened outlooks. He had never realised before that the doing of commonplace things could be so absorbing. The homing instinct, which was strong in him although he knew it not, was finding development.

These daily visits of Johnnie to the Manor were inexpressibly sweet to Sunshine. She was perpetually discovering in his character fresh traits which the superficiality of his life had never allowed to blossom forth. He displayed a wonderful thoughtfulness in small ways, and never forgot from day to day what she told him. Sunshine possessed the gift of creating an

atmosphere about her, and intuitively Johnnie came to realise that it was the kind of atmosphere which he loved. At times Sunshine's sympathy was lavished equally between the pathos and humour of some of Johnnie's attempts to follow out what he knew would please her. His casual attitude towards life must have been a very ephemeral crust of affectation, to be rubbed off by such a simple brush as contact with the daily round and common task, she concluded.

"He's coming on quite nicely. He's thatched a hole in the roof as big as himself," announced Ernest, on one of his visits to the Manor. "Mrs. Fancy quotes him to all and sundry as a prodigy."

Johnnie had made friends with Eli Blades's grandfather the thatcher, a wizened old man of squatter descent, in whom the hereditary traits of his lineage lingered. A thrifty annexation of whatever chance threw in his way was his moral code. He made use of everything. One evening, after the day's work was done, Johnnie came upon him slipping quietly along in the dusk with a bundle of straw on his back. There was something shadowy about his movements, and Johnnie had the curiosity to track him to his lair, a small croft buried amongst the gorse on the common.



He eyed Johnnie suspiciously when he found that he had been followed. The straw was thatching straw, but there was enough of it and to spare, and it was a pity to let it lie about and go to waste. Finding that Johnnie was innocent of detective motives, he explained what he was going to do with it, and Johnnie was initiated into the primitive methods of producing home-cured bacon. Before streak of dawn, one out of the old thatcher's herd of little black porkers would have squeaked its last squeak. It would then be rolled up in the bundle of straw and the straw set alight. The cleansing of fire would do the rest. A very black little pig, singed and purified, would emerge from the charred bundle, to be cut up into quarters and hung in the cavernous recesses of the kitchen chimney. The pungent smoke from the dried sods over which its feet had so often trotted would be the final stage of the cure.

Johnnie listened to the tale with interest, especially when the old man volunteered the information that Mrs. Fancy's predecessors at the cottage had been famed for their skill in home-curing. The old donkey stable had then been the dwelling house of the squatter and his family, and its wide chimney was specially adapted for the purpose.

Johnnie took the first opportunity of carefully

examining the chimney. The recess into which it was built had evidently been fitted with low settles; and, when he cleared away the litter of rubbish which blocked the bricked hearth, the remains of a fireplace were laid bare. He collected a handful of chips and shavings from the wood stack where he and Maisie had found the material with which to mend the fence, and, piling them on to the hearth, proceeded to light a fire. When the blaze flamed up the chimney, it revealed the blackened hooks from which the hams had hung; in a little square hole let into the wall, close to his hand, he found the old tinder box. The home life of long past days was recalled at every touch.

It happened to be a cheerless afternoon, and a misty drizzle enveloped the common, making the outer world depressingly grey. Johnnie threw a few more chips on the blaze and looked round on the effect.

The whitewash was crumbling from the walls, the flooring was mere beaten earth, the windows were hanging loose from their sockets; but, with that glow from the dancing flame illuminating every dusky corner and shining on the dark beams of the raftered roof, a something lovable was produced. For how many years had that hearth lain cold and deserted! At one time it had been the centre of daily life. Children

had gathered round it—wild, lawless little creatures probably—and old men and women had dozed away the last years of their toil-worn existence crouching over its warmth. All had passed away; the memory of their lives unrecorded. Only the shell of their habitation had been left standing: materialism outliving the human span.

A chirping twitter sounded from the doorstep and a robin hopped on to the earthen floor. Perhaps it belonged to the family of robins who had been reared amongst the rafters. The domestic instinct of robins is inherent. It had divined that an element of domesticity was in the air, and it had come to offer a friendly call of welcome.

Johnnie never knew at what moment an idea, which rapidly took form and tangibility, first flashed into his mind. He surprised Sunshine that evening by asking her, somewhat irrelevantly, if she really liked the cottage.

"I love it," was her answer. "And I love the common. It is so wild and free. You can see such miles of it."

"But in the winter time, when you can't get out to see," persisted Johnnie. "The inside rooms are very small, and the windows are so high up." His voice softened, and he added a

little diffidently, "It doesn't matter for ordinary people, but you have to——"

"See things from my point of view," said Sunshine, knowing why he hesitated. She was touched by his consideration for her. Outwardly, he never showed that he noticed her helplessness. She knew that it was not indifference, but the chivalry of an innate deference to the restraints under which she lived.

Johnnie did not enlarge further on the subject of the cottage windows; but in the days which followed, although he seemed busier than usual, he became strangely uncommunicative. More strangely still he sought out the society of Mrs. Yorke.

Sunshine refrained from asking questions. The situation was so delightfully piquant, and the conspirators were enjoying their mystery so guilelessly. On one occasion she overheard a scrap of conversation.

"To exterminate the germ of insect pests in old woodwork, mix two ounces of bug powder in a solution of——."

The voice was Mrs. Yorke's, and she was reading from a green pamphlet which she held open in her hand. Sunshine did not hear the end of the recipe; but after Johnnie had gone, and when Mrs. Yorke entered her room later in the evening still holding the green pamphlet,

she wondered if the mystery were to be explained to her.

But Mrs. Yorke made no mention of anything in connection with the green pamphlet. She allowed it to slip from her fingers as she seated herself on the sofa, and her prominent blue eyes wore a very helpless expression as she fixed them on Sunshine's face.

"I'm so puzzled—so puzzled and—and anxious," she said haltingly.

It was unlike Mrs. Yorke to express herself thus. So many of her failures were attributable to her manner of plodding on with mistakes. She made no deductive use of past failures. Sunshine's sympathy went out to her.

"You've been worrying over something, and you look so tired," she said. "Perhaps if you told me about it, I could help. Do tell me."

And Mrs. Yorke told her. Into Sunshine's face crept a great wonder and a great awe. She listened silently; only at the end she laid her hands on the two limp ones lying on Mrs. Yorke's lap, and held them in a firm tenderness of strength. Tears were rolling slowly down Mrs. Yorke's cheeks. Slow difficult tears that ought to have been tears of gladness, and were not. She was not telling her news with the tremulous joy of a happy woman; she looked worn and spiritless. The crown of womanhood

was not coming to her on the radiant wings of youth. She was sorely perplexed; shadowed by a cloud of distrust that what she had to give was not wanted. Falteringly she tried to explain.

"Not wanted!" cried Sunshine in swift protest. "Ah, do not think that. Not wanted! What has made you dream of such a thing?"

"Because——" Mrs Yorke paused. She was so accustomed to the formality of rule that, when called upon to express herself simply, she was like a child stumbling over the pronouncing of new words.

"If a man wanted a child—a child of his own, and he knew!" She paused again. "Wouldn't he talk about it—say even some little ordinary thing about it—before it came?"

Sunshine felt as though she were being brought up against a blank wall. She was at a loss how to answer a confession so pathetic in its admittance.

"But are you quite sure that he really does know?" she questioned gently. "Perhaps he may not have understood." She did not dare to make her suggestion bolder. Mrs. Yorke's explanations were sadly involved at times.

Mrs. Yorke pondered over Sunshine's words. They contained a ray of comfort.

"Of course I tried to lead up to it," she

sighed. "I remember he left the room very hurriedly. But then—he doesn't like new ideas, or disturbances."

"Oh, don't call it a disturbance!" protested Sunshine.

Mrs. Yorke shook her head despondently. "It can't help being a disturbance. Just at the New Year time too. If you think that there can be any doubt that I did not make my meaning clear, I must think of some better way of expressing myself."

Sunshine marvelled. The tears were barely dry on Mrs. Yorke's cheek; it was doubtful if she knew that they had ever been there. From some hidden source they had welled up and overflowed; they had found vent, and she had regained her level. Therein lay a world of pathos. Another woman would have gained by the loss of those tears. She would have broken her level, but she would have found a new one. Sunshine felt oppressed by a sense of hopelessness. The negative in Mrs. Yorke was so much too strong for the positive; but then it was that which made her what she was.

"If I could only remember what I said before when I tried to explain." Mrs. Yorke was twirling a pencil round in her fingers, and her wandering glance fell on the green pamphlet, and, stooping, she picked it up.

"I can't remember," she said. "But I might jot down, on the margin here, one or two suggestions."

With an exclamation of dismay, Sunshine caught the paper from her. "Don't make notes about it," she pleaded. "I don't believe he knows! I don't believe you made him understand. It's all been a mistake. Make it real!"

She raised herself on her elbow; her eyes dilated and shone as her words fell quickly.

"If you gave him a son! Oh, don't you see? Can't you imagine? He would care then!"

But Mrs. Yorke's face did not reflect the glow of a new hope.

"There's Maisie," she said slowly. "If that happened it would change everything. I should be sorry to hurt Maisie."

Sunshine, for the moment, had forgotten Maisie. She could not reason away Mrs. Yorke's scruples. The singlemindedness of a nature which could be so honestly unselfish was a very beautiful thing. She felt rebuked.

"We don't know," she said at length. "We can only wait."

"Yes, we can only wait," echoed Mrs. Yorke; but her face had lost its look of puzzled helplessness when she left the room some time later.



## CHAPTER XX.

### THE SURPRISE.

THE Squire was in the habit of intimating the date of his return before he went away. On this occasion, the day chosen passed uneventfully without any foreshadowing of his coming, and the delay was welcomed by Johnnie and the opportunity seized upon. For reasons of his own he was anxious that Sunshine should be re-installed in the cottage before the Squire's return. Sunshine was told that everything was ready for her, and all that remained to be done was to arrange for her means of transit.

The ambulance corps was again pressed into the service. It was there, ready to be made use of, the difficulty was to restrain the zeal of its commander-in-chief. Mrs. Yorke insisted upon taking her share of the expedition, and Sunshine was a little anxious on this point. She need not have been. Mrs. Slippington had not over-rated her capacities when she had confided to Ernest, on the night of the ball, that she could manage Mrs. Yorke's schemes for her without that lady's knowledge. With every detail of equipment, smart, and in order, she

appeared with the stretcher and its bearers at the hour appointed. Mrs. Yorke had been provided for otherwise. No ordinary carriage could traverse the narrow tracks on the common; but an odd little concern which was accustomed to convey the washing to and from the laundry, and which exactly resembled a washing-basket on wheels, had been requisitioned, and the garden pony was put between the shafts. It wore knee-caps and blinkers and leather boots, and a vast amount of harness which had evidently descended to it from some thing much bigger than itself. Altogether the expedition, when it was ready to start, presented a curious spectacle.

Mrs. Yorke was given five minutes' start, with Johnnie at the pony's head. He could have drawn the whole thing himself without the encumbrance of the pony; but Mrs. Yorke was happy in the belief that she was driving, as she held the reins.

Mrs. Slippington watched the snail-like progress of the washing-basket quizzically. It could not be helped, but there was no doubt it ought to have been relegated to the rear of the procession and not put in the vanguard. There was no use in telling Johnnie to hurry. He merely held up his hand like a policeman at a crossing.

"Shall we pass them?" asked Mrs. Slippington, after having been brought to a standstill more than once.

"I think they want to get there first," answered Sunshine. "I don't mind these little waits. I enjoy them. They give me time to look round."

Mrs. Slippington smiled.

"No fear but that you'll have plenty of time for looking round," she remarked. "Would you like to be taken off the track to where you can see the view better?"

"Have you time to spare for that?"

Mrs. Slippington shrugged her shoulders.

"We've got to put in the time somewhere," she said; and, calling up the bearers, she directed the placing of the stretcher on a spot chosen by Sunshine herself. She rearranged the cushions, and her hands were deft and quick at their work. She did not hover about aimlessly, touching things that did not require to be touched, or making suggestions for the purpose of appearing solicitous.

"I wonder how she knew that I wanted to be left alone to enjoy it all by myself," wondered Sunshine, as Mrs. Slippington dropped quietly into the background.

The halt had taken place on the low ridge overlooking the common; the fields and wood-

lands lay behind; in front, the wide sweeps of open country stretched to the low horizon line. The first faint tinge of autumn was beginning to colour the undergrowth, purpling the masses of blackberry foliage as it tangled amongst the gorse, and yellowing the bracken which girdled the edge of the pine woods where they belted the fringe of open land. It was a grey day, with little colour in the sky except where a pearly sheen rimmed the edges of the cloud-banks. There was a crisp sweetness in the air, not of vegetation, but of something thinner and purer, which is to be found only where the land belongs to the wild.

Sunshine drank it in with a rapturous sense of possession. For the moment it was all hers. She could touch with her fingers the moss and soft carpet of green on either side of her. Through a golden clump of tall seed-grass the light wavered fitfully. The linnets and finches and little quick flitting birds, which live amongst the gorse, paid no heed to her silent watch. They were warbling their autumn songs of content. Their busy time was over, and they could now softly twitter reflections of what had been.

The view was so wide that to lie and watch was like learning the mysteries of an unexplored country. Sunshine found herself unconsciously

following the windings of what, she concluded, must be the main road, from where it stole out of the distance to where it disappeared behind the belt of pines not very far from where she lay. A closed vehicle of sorts was to be seen, crawling slowly along it. As it drew nearer, she saw that it was piled with luggage, and that two men were sitting on the box. The road was flat and unprotected on either side, so that it became easy to distinguish details. Just as the station fly—for such it obviously was—had almost reached the spot at which it must necessarily disappear from view, Sunshine saw the horse abruptly pulled up. Then, before the second man on the box could clamber down, the door of the fly was burst open, and its occupant precipitated himself into the road. From what followed in the way of pantomime display it was evident that a breezy storm was enveloping the fly and the two men in charge of it.

Sunshine shaded her eyes with her hand. There was no doubt as to what had happened. The Squire had returned! Why he had not been properly met was doubtless due to some blunder on the part of the six feet of black misery, who stood dejectedly by the door handle waiting until the storm had blown over.

Sunshine watched with some anxiety. Any

moment might see Johnnie's convoy emerge from the shelter of the brushwood, and the washing-basket and Mrs. Yorke could not fail to attract the Squire's attention. Interest grew acute as Johnnie's head came into view at the exact moment when the Squire, after waving to the six feet of black misery to take the luggage on without him, turned his back on the main road, and struck into the grass-drive down which his wife was advancing to meet him.

Sunshine was not a witness of the actual meeting. Some intervening cover allowed of only Johnnie's head to be visible, and the extreme top of the Squire's hat. The Squire was evidently walking round the washing-basket, and Johnnie's head was seen gyrating in his wake. There was no sound of shouting, and presently the two heads ceased their erratic circlings and vanished. Sunshine heard a light movement behind her, and Mrs. Slippington appeared. She was all alertness and ready for immediate action.

"They've turned the pony to go back—now's our chance," she said. There was no time given for further explanations. The bearers were waiting, and the stretcher was raised and the party fell into line. Once the beaten track was regained, the progress was so swift that, before Sunshine could realise how much ground

had been covered, the white gate, and the wooden fence, and the little cottage with its thatched roof and quaint arched eaves lay before her. Every trace of the scorching effects of the fire had disappeared. The blistered woodwork had been repainted, the flower borders were as tightly packed with glowing colours as a gardener's bouquet at a village show. Some generous hand had been at work amongst them.

Mrs. Fancy hurried down the pathway to open the gate. She was overflowing with emotional excitement, and did not know whether to give way to tears or rejoicing. Her apron was so slippery that she could not have wept into it if she had tried, and she was using her best pocket-handkerchief as a flag of welcome.

"Blessins on my little lady's comin' back, an' me all alone to give away the surprises, for what's come o' that lovey dear Master Johnnie I can't think, an' 'im workin' so 'ard, and all them barry loads o' pot plants an' 'e not to be 'ere to 'elp you in——"

Want of breath would allow of no further expression. Mrs. Fancy's outburst of greeting was an incoherent jumble, but to Sunshine it was quite intelligent and very sweet. She would have liked to put her arms round Mrs. Fancy's neck and hug her. Had she done so

the flood-gates would have given way, so she refrained.

Mrs. Slippington grasped the situation. Until she had seen her charge deposited in safety, sentimentality must wait. Her sharp query of "Now where to?" signified that the party was to move on, and Mrs. Fancy, waving her little flag of welcome, led the way.

"Where are you taking me to?" asked Sunshine, as the front of the cottage was passed, and she was permitted only a fleeting glimpse of the newly painted door. The brass knocker seemed to wink at her with knowing significance.

But Mrs. Fancy marched onwards. Her flag fluttered past the latticed windows gay with red geraniums, till she came to the big standard rose-tree, which guarded the entrance to the old donkey stable.

A cautious warning was whispered into the ear of Mrs. Slippington, who answered audibly :

"Shall we find everything ready inside?"

"As ready as if we'd been sittin' 'ere waitin' on a noo born babe," said Mrs. Fancy solemnly.

Sunshine was conscious at first only of the change from the fullness of the outer light to what was softly subdued within. Then she felt that what she had been resting upon was gently withdrawn, and the tension of her limbs relaxed as she sank on to the yielding strength of what



lay beneath. The sensation of luxurious ease was as unexpected as it was familiar. Her hand went out with an instinctive certainty of what it would find.

Yes! There were the ivory knobs ready to respond to her touch. The Automatic-Button-Presser had preceded her.

"I wonder what I shall find next?" she murmured.

Suddenly the subdued light brightened. The members of the ambulance corps had blocked up the doorway on entering; they had finished their work and gone, taking the stretcher with them. Mrs. Slippington waited behind for a few seconds.

"Tired?" she said kindly. "A little?" "You'll feel better after a rest and a cup of tea. No, I won't stay. Good-bye," and she was gone before Sunshine could put into words the measure of her thanks.

Mrs. Fancy had hurried on before to open and shut the gate; and, as the last shadow melted from before the doorway, the full light streamed through it and Sunshine saw her surroundings clearly.

## CHAPTER XXI.

“IT’S HOME,” SHE SAID.

IT was the old donkey stable; what else could it be?

Nothing had been materially altered. There was the same delightful jumble of squatter architecture, all odd angles and uneven lines; but the place seemed to have gained in size and dignity. Gone was the woodstack! Gone were the heaps of rubbish which had littered the earthen floor. The floor was boarded over now, and had been darkened to the same tone of colour as the over-arching beams. Some warm-hued rugs were stretched over the polished boards, and a cheerful wood-fire had been lit by Mrs. Fancy in honour of the home-coming. Its glow was reflected on the red-bricked hearth, and shone on the two old settles which flanked the spaces on either side. Nothing had been vandalised, but the place had regained its humanity and something else besides. Its rude beauty had been mellowed into a harmonious blending of warmth and comfort and refinement.

The tree stem, built into the wall, still kept its guard by the western window; but the window was no longer like a blind seeker straining after the light. Its latticed doors, which parted in the middle, stood wide open, and the framework had been mended. The little diamond panes shone bright and clear, and pots of yellow musk flanked either side of the broad window seat.

"Just on a level with my point of view," murmured Sunshine, and her eyes lingered over the distant landscape. She had always longed for a western window that would give her the sunset glow. Little patchwork curtains, made of gaily coloured scraps of cotton, hung at either side of the casement. They were curiously crude pieces of handiwork. She smiled involuntarily. One of Mrs. Fancy's pet moralisms recurred to her memory. "Save the crumbs and make the loaf."

At that moment Mrs. Fancy herself appeared with the tea-tray. The manner of her appearing was so surprising that Sunshine's eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"I never knew there was a door there before," she exclaimed; for Mrs. Fancy looked as though she had suddenly burst through the solid wall.

"No more did I know as there was a door

there. It was 'id by the woodstack. The 'eaps o' secrets as that old woodstack's been 'idin' you wouldn't believe! "

Mrs. Fancy laid down the tea-tray, and stood with arms outstretched pointing this way and that.

"Them settles was found behind it; and that old table as has got 'most as many legs as a crab. Them chairs too! I've set them so as the best bits is seen."

"And you've made cushions for them. They look so comfortable," said Sunshine.

"You should 'ave seen 'em when they comed out. Oh my! Burn 'em all, I says, for wormy rubbidge; but Master Johnnie! No, 'e wouldn't. 'E keep on messin' about with bug killin' stuffs enough to sicken a monkey. I let him be; but I was pleased about findin' that door! You pops right through into the jam cupboard as I allus thought had some subterraneous burrowins at the back of it for it tapped holler."

"And you can go in and out of the cottage that way?" queried Sunshine, still wondering.

"Seems like it, since I've just comed out," laughed Mrs. Fancy delightedly. "It don't show much bein' plastered up same as the wall, but there it is! "

"I wonder why the things were hidden," said Sunshine.

"Old Sarah Jumps, as lived 'ere, was crazed on 'idin' things. She'd 'ide the spoons up the chimney and 'er savins box inside 'er Sunday bonnet! 'Folks that don't pay no attention to me when I'm alive 'll come wantin' this that and the other when I'm dead,' she was given to sayin'."

Mrs. Fancy had been busily arranging the tea things on the crab-legged table whilst talking. She drew Sunshine's attention to the tea-pot and held it up for inspection.

"A beauty ain't it? Bigger nor the old one by 'arf. But there! You'll be 'avin' such a crowd o' gay folks in 'ere, they're'll be no doin' with the old ways."

Her voice quavered a little doubtfully, in spite of her admiration of the new teapot. Into her homely face came an expression of yearning love.

"Is my little lady pleased?" she questioned, drawing nearer. "Master Johnnie—'e 'as worked 'ard 'e 'as, but—I kep on mindin' the hodds and hends. Them musky plants, and these there little patchy-work curtings. Are you real glad to be back? I took a turn this mornin' thinkin' it looked sort of pinchy like after the fine rooms you've been livin' in at the Manor. Then I said to myself, fine folks or

no fine folks we can allus be 'orspitable, and I pops over to the shop and buys a noo teapot."

Sunshine found it difficult to answer. The tears came into her eyes, and something made her voice sound husky.

"It's home," she said.

Mrs. Fancy was evidently seized with something of the same kind of husky sensation in her throat. She hastily put down the teapot and hurried out of the room, remarking over her shoulder as she vanished through the mysterious little door, "It's my girdle cakes. I smells them burnin'."

It was not until the light had begun to fade that Johnnie made his appearance at the cottage. Sunshine was alone. Through the open lattice she saw him approaching. His figure was silhouetted against the luminous background of the western sky, and something in the way he moved arrested her attention. He walked with his head down, and did not seem to be paying any attention to where he was going. He would have passed the lattice had she not called softly to him across the musk plants and arrested his attention.

He stopped and hesitated.

"Aren't you coming to call on me in my beautiful new parlour?" she asked. She was so full of gratitude for what Johnnie's plottings

and plannings had compassed that she was longing to express herself in words. The window ledge was as broad outside as it was in; and Johnnie crossed over and seated himself on it.

“I hope you are pleased,” he said.

Mrs. Fancy had used almost the same words, but they had welled up from an overflowing heart. Johnnie spoke perfunctorily, and Sunshine felt chilled by a sense of disappointment. She tried to thrust the feeling from her. She told Johnnie how pleased she was, how touched by his thought for her. How the surprise of the donkey stable was the realisation of a dream which she had never imagined could come true. She had always longed for a parlour with a western window.

It was a one-sided enthusiasm. Johnnie was mechanically responsive, but that was all. He answered questions like an automaton.

Yes! Mrs. Yorke had helped a lot. She had suggested the rugs. They were healthier than carpets. She had looked up the name of the stuff to kill wood-worms. The Automatic-Button-Presser was a present. Sunshine was to keep it for always.

“How very kind!” said Sunshine. “I wish she were here, so that I might thank her. What happened? Why did she turn to go back?”

"She wanted to go back," said Johnnie.

"And the Squire? It was the Squire wasn't it?"

"Yes! It was the Squire," answered Johnnie.

Sunshine felt bewildered. What was the matter with Johnnie? Was he oppressed with a form of diffidence as to whether he had taken too much upon himself in the matter of the surprise, or had a mood of absentmindedness descended upon him? Perhaps it were better to persevere with questions, and trust to his waking-up of his own accord.

"And so the Squire and Mrs. Yorke went back to the Manor, and you went with them. You stayed to tea I suppose?"

"Yes."

Sunshine was beginning to feel really unhappy. Johnnie was sitting sideways on the ledge, and, the light being behind him, his face was in shadow. A log of wood, smouldering on the hearth, fell over on its side, and spurts of flame licked along its uncharred surface. The whitewashed walls were flooded with a glow of radiance. He turned his head and looked in through the lattice, and Sunshine watched him. What manner of thoughts were passing through his mind? His shoulder leant against the open casement, and it was evident



that he was vividly aware of all that he saw. His gaze lingered first on one object and then on another. When he frowned a little, when his eyes concentrated in critical observation, he was tracing the progress of his work up to its present perfection. He had built up this picture, which he now saw for the first time in its completion. It betrayed him in its significance. He had not realised how much of the instinct of home-making had lain at the root of his work. The incentive had set its stamp on the quality of his building.

The firelight flickered and danced; now high amongst the rafters, now along the dark surface of the floor, throwing grotesque shadows where it fell on the walls. A gleam shot up suddenly, and lit the spot where the little donkey-shoe had been wont to hang. Sunshine broke the silence by exclaiming almost involuntarily :

“It’s gone. The donkey-shoe I mean. I hope it isn’t lost. Maisie loved that little shoe. She is certain to ask for it.”

At the mention of Maisie’s name, Johnnie moved, and half turned his back on the open window.

“It’s not lost,” he said. “I’ll have it put up again.”

“Has the Squire brought any news of Maisie?” asked Sunshine. Johnnie was always

a little shy when Maisie's name was mentioned. Sometimes Sunshine introduced it purposely, so that if he wished to talk about her he might. It was with this thought in her mind, and also because she had heard so little of Maisie's doings of late, that she followed up the subject.

"Has the Squire brought back any news of Maisie?" she questioned again.

Johnnie raised himself slowly from the window-ledge. His head stood almost on a level with the top of the casement, and his voice seemed to pass over Sunshine, and address space.

"Maisie's got engaged," he said.

He spoke very deliberately, as though giving utterance to words he had learnt by heart.

"Maisie! Oh, Johnnie!" was all that Sunshine could find voice to say. She put out her hand to touch him, but he had drawn away into the shadow. The dusk had been falling quickly during the last few minutes, and when she stretched forward to see if he were still there she could not distinguish his figure. She listened. The thick short turf muffled sound, but she heard footsteps, lifeless footsteps that dragged heavily. Johnnie had vanished into the kindly darkness. His hurt was sore and raw and terribly new, and he wanted to hide it from eyes however tender.

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Sunshine covered her face with her hands, and pressed her fingers tightly against her temples.

“Help him—please help him,” she whispered over and over again under her breath.

That was all she could do. Send the heart-cry of another’s pain onwards.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### THE SQUIRE'S NEW OUTLOOK.

IN whatever fashion the Squire had been made cognisant of what the future might hold in store for him, there was no question but that this time he had not been led astray by mystification.

"Dear 'art alive! Ain't he skeered like?" was Mrs. Fancy's comment, following on the occasion of his first visit to the cottage after his return.

Mrs. Fancy sucked in the corners of her mouth, and puffed out her cheeks, after a fashion she adopted when taken by surprise. "Fixin' up her mind," she called it. The facial peculiarity gave her the expression of a pouting cherub. She hummed a tuneless little warble to herself, but said nothing more.

The Squire's visit had been an unsatisfactory one. He had taken little or no notice of the changes made; Johnnie might have saved himself the anxiety of speculating as to whether his work would be approved of or not. No mention was made of Maisie's engagement, and Sunshine shrank from direct questioning, for

she could not refer to it without in some way betraying Johnnie, and this she would not do.

The Squire was very seriously impressed by the position in which he found himself; and in the days which followed his return he became more and more impressed. Unlike his usual mode of getting things off his mind, he did not resort to noisy measures. He grew strangely subdued and reticent of speech. He meant well, but he did not know what to do. He performed odd kindnesses in a secretive way which robbed them of their usefulness, because Mrs. Yorke never knew what reason he had for doing them. He practised such an extraordinary self-restraint in his voice and manner that to the outer world it appeared as though he were suffering from acute depression of spirits. A muffled gloom dogged his footsteps, and the servants, when waiting at table, kept a furtive watch on each other's movements. If a spoon rattled or one dish chipped against another, the delinquent's exit was as rapid as a lightning flash.

The storm-cloud was never allowed to burst in public, and it was a matter of relief to the household that the Squire spent so much of his day out of doors. Perhaps the fat grey cob could have told the secret of his master's state of mind. A revelation based on the most

primitive of natural instincts would have been the result. Above and beyond all things, the Squire loved his land. Throughout his long lonely rides—for he never asked Johnnie to accompany him now and Johnnie held aloof—all manner of strange new thoughts were stirring the stagnation of past acceptance. With this wholly unexpected knowledge, that a child was to be born to him, had come a passion of desire that he should see a son of his own inherit the lands, and carry forward the name and traditions of his race.

He had never been a man who had calculated on eventualities. Had his first marriage not been such a fleeting episode in his life, it might have materially reflected on the development of his character. Maisie's sex had been a disappointment; but it did not preclude her from inheritance. Time had drifted. The insidious selfishness of tastes and habits, which were locally all-important and personal, had gradually environed him in a world of his own, which was a very small world because he was the biggest man in it. It sufficed. He thought he was an autocrat; he was servant to the autocracy of a most tyrannical self.

Into this all-sufficient little world had come the disturbing effects of Maisie's emancipation to ruffle its placidity. The means the Squire

had taken to rid himself of the irksomeness of his responsibility had been an unconsidered impulse of selfish cowardice. And now! In this unexpectedly new outlook which was opening before him there were many conflicting elements to wrestle with. The Squire's conscience was perhaps quite as busy as were his new soaring hopes during those solitary hours of unwonted self-analysis. The wholly tragic part of it all lay in his inability to express what he felt to the only human being to whom it vitally mattered what he thought or what he felt. A barrier of heart-loneliness existed between two, who ought to have been one. It was not a barrier which could be assailed and broken down; it was a temperamental vacuum.

To what process of development would that little life that was to come be debtor in the great problem of human responsibility? What fluctuating currents, what crystallisations of past inheritances, what potentialities for impending futures determine the mystery of Divine selection?

The human parenthood has its ever broken note in life's transient span of evanescence. The unbroken note, the all-embracing "Our Father" that denotes the Divine Parenthood, greets us on the threshold of life and goes with

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us beyond the veil. We can neither refuse nor accept it. It IS.

No being is born into the world with the sole right to its own ego : the “ me ” and the “ my ” of the creature denote an individualism whose innate strength is rooted in the comprehensive “ Our Father.” Gathering all, linking all, drawing all; banishing exclusiveness of time and generation, of race and class, of sect and party, that passionate cry of “ Our Father ” proclaims the inclusion of the all in the great Father Heart.



## CHAPTER XXIII.

“IT’S NOT GOOD ENOUGH.”

It happened that Ernest had just started on one of his wandering rounds a few days previous to the time of Sunshine’s return to the cottage. His absence lasted over a month. It was getting well on into October before the chestnut once more made his appearance alongside of the fence, and had the satisfaction of rubbing his nose against Mrs. Fancy’s fat shoulder.

Ernest left the old horse to Mrs. Fancy, and made his way to where he was told he would find Sunshine. He had heard rumours of the transformation of the old donkey-stable.

“You are the most appreciative person to whom I have shown my new parlour,” remarked Sunshine, after the ceremony of ‘showing off’ had elicited from Ernest a whole-hearted approval.

Sunshine’s voice dropped a little sadly.

“It was all Johnnie’s idea. He worked so hard and was so interested. And now! It’s all gone flat somehow.”

Ernest cast his eyes over the most robust-looking of the armchairs. They had bulgy backs and very spindly legs.

"Delightfully venerable. Are they safe?" he queried.

"If you are careful. It is considered best not to move them about too much."

Ernest seated himself cautiously, and arranged the cushion, which was lumpy in places.

He surveyed his surroundings.

"Very nicely done. A most pleasing piece of renaissance; and, with your books and your flowers and the small femininities that you've surrounded yourself with, it's really delightfully liveable. Very pleasing, indeed!"

"Are you comfortable in that chair?" asked Sunshine. "You don't look it."

"I think I'll change over and sit on the window seat." Ernest gathered up his cushion. "The ancients must have had odd kind of backbones. I can't get mine to fit in to this bulge; it's not meant for leisured ease."

He rearranged himself in the corner of the window seat.

"This is more sociable. I'm nearer, and I can always talk best with my back to the light."

But, in contradiction to his words, he fell silent. His fingers strayed absent-mindedly

amongst the musk plants where they made a mellow glow within the lattice. Sheltered from the nip of autumn's chill they still flowered gaily. A blue-bottle, tempted from its hidden crevice, buzzed against the diamond-paned window in search of some sunny spot where it could bask its opalescent wings and twirl its little black legs.

"I've always been very fond of the smell of musk," remarked Ernest at length.

"Did you choose that seat only to talk about musk?" said Sunshine with gentle reproof.

"No," answered Ernest truthfully.

"There is so much that I want to hear about," continued Sunshine. "I ought not to say that I have been left out in the cold since I came back from the Manor; but—people all seem to be scattered."

"Scatter-brained?" suggested Ernest.

"Maisie never writes letters, at least not letters with anything in them."

"My dear lady, this generation of youth never does. The next won't have the chance of reading the memoirs of their grandfathers and grandmothers under the titles of, well—" "Things that I oughtn't to have told" or "The Diary of a Family Skeleton," and so on."

"Don't!" pleaded Sunshine. "I'm in earnest. I want to know things."

"And I wish I didn't know quite so much," said Ernest. "It's all so uncomfortable. I'm sorry you're worrying. What all do you want to know? Where shall I begin?"

"With Maisie. Is it true that she is engaged?"

Ernest nodded.

"How do you know that it's true? Who is the man? Is it all right?"

Ernest ticked off the questions on his fingers.

"I suppose I must forgive you for doubting my veracity as to how I know it's true. I've just come from stopping in the same house with the two people principally concerned. Who's the man? Hitchin Dawly is his name. If you were in the way of going about you'd probably have heard of him. You ask, Is it all right? Well—he's kind of used up. It's not good enough."

Ernest met the expression of pained enquiry in Sunshine's eyes. There was something of the same pain in his own.

"Johnnie, dear boy, is eating his heart out," he added.

"Poor little Maisie! Is there no one to protect her?" said Sunshine. "Her father—— Have you been at the Manor?" she asked.

Ernest intimated that he had.

"Your little Maisie's affairs are being allowed

to drift—or rather they are being left unreservedly in her own hands," he said. "Since she started in the pursuit of knowledge she has spread her butterfly wings considerably. She has been having an excellent time. To be a success is just a little intoxicating when youth is so very young."

Sunshine sighed. "Tell me more," she said. "Does Maisie love the man? Does he love her? If there's love in it, that would make all the difference."

Ernest hesitated for a moment, but his answer was decided when it came.

"He's thrown a glamour over her. I honestly think it's that. He's twice her age, and she's just innocent enough to imagine that the dash of mystery about him means something more interesting than it does. He's not half as interesting as he looks. He's hard up, of course, and on the look out for a soft billet."

"And Maisie is to be the soft billet." A quick scorn crept into Sunshine's voice.

Ernest spread out his hands and gathered in emptiness.

"There comes a time," he remarked oracularly, "when week-end cadging and fattening on stray pastures wear rather thin. It's too precarious. Hitchin Dawly has found life very

pleasant so far. He wants to insure a comfortable permanency."

The scorn in Sunshine's voice deepened.

"Maisie can't love a thing like that."

"I said she was glamoured," corrected Ernest. "There's something about the man that attracts women. He can make himself indispensable to them, and he knows his world well enough to understand how to do it. He has taken a great deal of trouble to make himself indispensable to Maisie. She sees the world at her feet through him."

Sunshine did not respond at once. She turned her head aside and watched the blue-bottle. It had buzzed down from the window-pane, and was flattening itself luxuriously on the downy warmth of a musk leaf.

"Is Maisie to be allowed to make a fatal mistake out of ignorance?" she said at length.

"And is my Johnnie to break his heart out of diffidence?" answered Ernest.

"Ought we to do anything? Ought we to try to prevent this mistake being made?" questioned Sunshine.

"Preventible evil by the individual means preventible evil for humanity, just like weeding a bed of cabbages. I should weed Hitchin Dawly out of this cabbage patch," said Ernest emphatically.

"Why did you apply that word diffidence in reference to Johnnie just now?" asked Sunshine.

"Because Johnnie is the better man of the two; but he'll never show up that he is."

"I'd like to see the man. Hitchin Dawly, I mean," said Sunshine.

"Why not ask him to come and see you? He'd come. He's that sort."

In answer to Sunshine's look of surprise Ernest proceeded to explain.

"The Squire's would-be son-in-law is at the Manor."

Sunshine was conscious of a pang of disappointment.

"Then Maisie is back. I did not know," she said.

"I fancy it was an unexpected return," Ernest hastened to add. "Of course, it was quite the right thing for Hitchin Dawly to come to the Manor. The Squire may have asked him; I can't say. The engagement hasn't been given out formally, so it rather looks as though he were here to do business."

Ernest moved a little, and stretched forward to look out of the window.

"Here comes Johnnie," he said. "Would it bore you if we stayed to tea, or shall I take him away?"

"Stay," said Sunshine.

The unexpected happened in just that little prosaic way in which such things do happen. After it was all over, and Sunshine lay musing in the quiet of the evening shadows, the scene, and the chief actors and the significance of what it all stood for, came back to her with the vividness of a living picture. Every face was visualised; every gesture and characteristic of speech and manner remembered; the quiver of an underlying emotion, the jarring of a note which revealed a rankling hurt. At the time it had been a passing kaleidoscope of scattered fragments; she gathered all the bits together and fitted them into a whole.

Johnnie had been putting some wood on the fire. He had let a log fall heavily, and that had been the first warning.

Maisie's peremptory "I'm coming in. I'm bringing a visitor with me," had covered Johnnie's awkwardness, and then the introduction of the visitor had followed. It all came about so quickly, and people fell into their places. Ernest had filled in gaps, and Johnnie had handed round bread and butter, and helped Sunshine to pour out tea. He had been very quiet, but Maisie had gone to the other extreme and been almost noisy. She was sparkling, vivacious, daringly outspoken in a way she had



never been before. Her flippancies bordered on the verge of what only her obvious ignorance excused. Could it be the real Maisie who spoke, or was this but a reflection of someone she was trying to copy? There was not a subject which she treated seriously, as she pattered out her little self-sufficiencies with easy assurance. How, in such a short time, had she acquired such a miscellany of undigested knowledge?

Hitchin Dawly had seated himself in one of the bulgy-backed chairs. He was a tall man; the upper part of his body appeared too heavy for his legs, and the middle clapped in. He had a cracky laugh, which might have been attractive, but which somehow repelled Sunshine, and so did his face. His hair was sleekly brushed away behind his ears, which were set far back in his head and pricked upwards. He talked exceedingly well, but there was a subtle under-current, of a want of faith in all goodness, in what he said. With his cracky laugh he would have dissected the morals of his friends as callously as he would the antiquity of the chair he was sitting in.

It was all over now. Maisie had shown no inclination to linger for the few quiet words which Sunshine would have longed to hear. It would almost have seemed as though she

wished to avoid such a contingency, for she paused momentarily on the threshold to call back, "I must hurry. Stepmama is laid up with the flue, and I've got to do hostess."

Hitchin Dawly, scratching a match to light his cigarette, had laughed his cracky laugh. What he had heard of Mrs. Yorke had not predisposed him to want to see her. His laugh described his feeling accurately.

Johnnie was the last to go; only Sunshine had seen the dumb misery in his eyes. Just before leaving, he had taken something out of his pocket. It was the little donkey-shoe.

"You asked for it," he said. "I'll put it back—just as it was before." And he had hung up the shoe.

"Just as it was before!" It had cost him much to say that. It summed up everything.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### MAISIE MAKES A PUZZLING DISCOVERY.

THE visit of Mr. Hitchin Dawly to the Manor was a fleeting one. He came, he saw, and he went away satisfied. What he had seen surpassed his expectation; but the Manor under its present *régime* did not suit his tastes. He was a sybarite of the sybarites.

The Manor was not actually uncomfortable, but it was not big enough to hold two men, who, each in his own way, were supremely selfish. The Squire did not encourage guests of the sybarite type. It was not that he was lacking in hospitality. When occasion required he could entertain generously, but in his own house he did not like people who interfered with his freedom, and who were not in sympathy with his tastes.

Hitchin Dawly, if a sybarite, was a philosophical one. He did not abuse conditions; he made conditions serve his ends. He had come to spy the land, and the fact that he was left to make his investigations in his own way suited his purpose. It was a matter for congratulation that influenza should have isolated his

hostess at the time of his visit. He dismissed her from his calculation as a negligible quantity.

Maisie was his guide and interpreter. She was flattered by the interest she found exhibited in all that was connected with the home, which she certainly loved with genuine sincerity, but no romance entered into the future visions of those hours spent in the society of her lover. A girl with more worldly experience might have been set wondering at the shrewdness of the question asked, the calculating exactness with which details were dwelt upon, but she was blinded by her ignorance. Hitchin Dawly was making sure of his ground. He knew he should have to wait for the fat years, but Maisie's little fortune, inherited on her eighteenth birthday, would serve meanwhile, and a father-in-law, so rich in lands and gear as the Squire, was a very substantial background on which to draw. Maisie, dabbling in the shallows of life, had no thought for such things. She had of late been living in an atmosphere of superficiality, where irresponsibility was a cult, where life was a chasing of bubbles, a tossing aside of the spent, in the greedy clamour for the next moment's pleasure. She had not been herself during those days. She had been but the reflex of what was going on around her. The mirror would have to be

broken ere the vision could reset itself to a new reflection.

Hitchin Dawly left the Manor well pleased with the result of his visit. The only point on which he felt an uncomfortable sense of insecurity was the reception accorded to him by the Squire. The Squire baffled him. A man who blustered was generally easy to manage, and Hitchin Dawly prided himself on being something of a diplomatist, but his prospective father-in-law gave him no opportunities for diplomacy. There had been about the Squire's manner a "No you don't until I choose" attitude, which had thwarted all advances towards a definite understanding. The would-be suitor took his departure without any formal recognition of his claims having been acknowledged.

Maisie did not find time hang heavy on her hands after he had left. She looked forward to what the days held in store; the plans she had made and the invitations she had accepted allowed for but a very brief interval of leisure. She had only half tasted of the sweets of liberty; she was eager for wider horizons; and the man who held the magic key which opened all doors to her knew how to make himself necessary, and fettered her by no exactions. She had repulsed Johnnie's love; thrust it from

her. It was because she was afraid of it. It claimed the something of herself she did not wish to relinquish. Johnnie had failed because of his honesty : Hitchin Dawly used his honesty to further his purpose. He was not in love with Maisie ; he struck no false note in the manner of his wooing. He had worked on the pleasure-loving, irresponsible side of her character ; and, if she mistook the glamour which he had thrown about her, he was not concerned as to the cost of disillusionment ; that could bide its time.

Only once during the short time that she was at home did Maisie see her stepmother, and even then it had been but a passing glimpse. The attack of influenza which had confined Mrs. Yorke to her room had been a severe one. She had isolated herself from the household behind a rampart of disinfectants, and no one was allowed to communicate with her except Mrs. Slippington, who appeared to have some mysterious right to come and go as she pleased. No one questioned her right. She gave no trouble, she presumed on no privileges ; but she gathered the slack reins of management into her hands, and, as is the way when wheels are made to run smoothly, the smoothness was accepted very tolerantly so long as it remained smooth.

It was the evening before her departure, and Maisie was running upstairs on her way to dress for dinner. She was in a hurry, but, as she passed along the corridor from which Mrs. Yorke's room opened, her pace slackened, and she held back a little. The door of Mrs. Yorke's room opened, and Mrs. Slippington came out, carrying a quantity of parcels evidently ready for the post. She thought that she had shut the door behind her, but Maisie as she drew near saw that she had not. Maisie paused. The door was perceptibly opening wider of its own accord. Ought she to shut it? She advanced a few steps nearer; the room beyond was more brightly lit than the corridor, and she could see the interior distinctly.

Mrs. Yorke was lying on a couch drawn up to the fire and the lamplight fell on her face. Perhaps that was what made it appear so white, and the hand with which she shaded her eyes from the fire-glow, so thin and transparent. Obeying a sudden impulse, for which she could not account, Maisie noiselessly pushed open the door and entered the room.

Mrs. Yorke glanced round, and a startled look came into her eyes. She put out her hand warningly. "Oh, you should not have come in! I don't think the risk of infection is over yet."

"I—I'm so sorry," blurted out Maisie. It was all that she could find to say. She really was sorry, sorry in a kind of fashion which had a good deal of surprised wonder in it. Mrs. Yorke, in some unexplainable way, looked almost beautiful. The wrap she wore was soft and white, and lay along the straight lines of the couch in loose folds. The luminous white of her skin was intensified by illness, and Maisie's abrupt entrance had brought to her cheeks a faint colour which made her eyes shine with unnatural lustre.

Maisie did not attempt to advance further. Her self-confidence seemed to ebb away from her. She felt like an awkward child who had blundered into a position which it wanted to get out of, and could not.

"I—I'm sorry," she repeated stupidly. She glanced towards a table which was drawn close up to Mrs. Yorke's couch. A large cardboard box with the lid off was lying on it, and a quantity of white fluffy things were hanging over the edge. Mrs. Yorke hurriedly replaced the lid over the box, and Maisie felt repulsed. She retreated slowly towards the door, and the look of relief which crossed Mrs. Yorke's face smote her with a sharp twinge of reproach.

"I hope you will soon be better," she said rather feebly, and closed the door behind her.



She passed along the corridor with lagging steps, until she came to a bend where a short flight of stairs led up to her own room. She looked back. Someone had entered the corridor from the further end, and she saw that it was her father. She had heard no noise. She did not know why she had looked back, and when she realised who it was, it struck her at once as odd. The Squire's tread invariably betrayed his whereabouts. It was short, sharp, and decisive, and some characteristic of voice generally heralded his approach.

There was something almost furtive about this silently moving figure. Maisie watched and could not quite believe in its identity, until she saw it disappear into the alcove from which her father's dressing-room opened.

It was all rather mysterious. Maisie shivered a little as the draught from an uncurtained window caught her in passing. A shadow seemed suddenly to have descended on the buoyancy of her spirits. It reminded her of that curious sensation of being left out in the cold which had oppressed her on the night of the birthday ball. She tried to shake off the feeling.

"It shows that I don't count; no one needs me here. I'm glad I'm going away to-morrow," she repeated again and again to herself. But

the assumption of indifference was not very convincing.

This was her home, and she did not feel at home in it. There was an undercurrent of something which she did not understand. She was excluded from that something; she was not trusted, and that rankled.

## CHAPTER XXV.

### ERNEST TO THE RESCUE.

NOVEMBER had come and gone, that month so maligned, and yet, which out of the twelve is more maternal and more charged with loving forethought and wise care? Nature cherishes her children of the earth. They must be given their rest-time after the strenuous struggle of generous living, time to relax from effort, time to gather up strength for the fostering of new nurslings. The flaming splendour of autumn's pageant is the last sacrifice to the keeping up of appearances. Mother Nature draws her curtains of grey mist and shrouding twilight, and the tattered rags of what has been are not reproached. The last storm-stressed banner, which jests at the stripped nakedness of the tree which bore it, is not chided.

"I do not need to be trim and tidy," whispers the leaf-strewn sod.

"I can wear my old brown frock till it drops to pieces," chirps the russet of the beech hedge.

"We can let our curls tangle anyhow," chimes in the chorus.

And from the copses and sodden thickets, spangled with the quivering diamond drops which the sun's kiss cannot melt, comes a requiem of peace. The 'sough' of the wind through the pine tops croons the frost king's cradle song for winter's sleep.

Ernest had been somewhat exercised in his mind of late concerning Franz. Franz was suffering from the effects of a chill, and as it seemed to give him a ghoulisn enjoyment to encourage the symptoms of his disorder rather than discourage them, he made slow progress towards recovery.

"I promised to look after the boy, so I've been turning over in my mind what's the best thing to be done," Ernest confided to Sunshine.

"And?" questioned Sunshine. Ernest never made confidences aimlessly.

"I've told him that I'll take him a-holidaying somewhere, and I've allowed him to choose the where," said Ernest.

"Was that wise?"

"Under the circumstances, yes. It's given him something wholesome to think about. Since I suggested the idea he's been devouring guide-books instead of stuffing himself with the contents of the medicine cupboard. I chose the guide-books," added Ernest.

Sunshine laughed, and Ernest smiled appreciatively.

"Of course, I had to be the guide. The choice of selection was a foregone necessity, but the importance pleased him. We're going down to the New Forest. There's a nice little place I know there, a kind of glorified pub. It caters for honeymooners in the summer, and in winter for the sportsman who wants to stable his horse and pick up a day's hunting. Franz can make his little *Ausfluchs*, while I put in some reading. It all fits in quite comfortably."

As he was leaving the cottage, Ernest added a few parting words, which were prompted by something in the manner of Sunshine's good-bye.

"I'm leaving you a solemn charge while I'm away," he said. "Look after Johnnie. Invent wants. Keep a home-corner for him, and let him know it's there. I was half afraid he'd want to break away after this knock-out, but he hasn't. And it's dreary work killing a hurt. Will you promise to look after him?" And Sunshine promised.

Ernest put his head in at the western lattice in passing. There were still a few words left unsaid.

"It might interest you to be the recipient of a few stray jottings as to our doings. I'll risk

it," he remarked, and did not wait for an answer.

Ernest kept to the letter of his word. He wrote, and the threads of his discourse were very much after the manner of stray jottings. He did not apologise for the leaving out of conventional beginnings and endings, and managed to compress a great deal of subject matter into very small space.

"Here we are, comfortably housed," ran the first communication, which arrived some days after his departure. "Franz opened the campaign by losing his heart to the barmaid, to whom he poured out the overflowings of that organ in safety, as she is betrothed to the local policeman, a hairy giant weighing sixteen stone. On discovery of the *verlobtment*, Franz was much upset and applied at the bar for a glass of vermuth. On my venturing to suggest that the vermuth might inspire a duel with the *verlobt* one, he saw the point. 'He might be jealous,' I suggested diffidently.

"'No—jealousy does not go with such a corpulence. But he is formeedable! I will not fight. He has got a bloo-ooming waist, and the approach is difficult.'

"Since then an astonishing *boulversement* has taken place. Franz has transferred his affections to the policeman. He disposed of the lady with somewhat heartless candour.

“ ‘You haf the remains of good looks; but my love is not yet profound, so I go at home to find a wife.’

“ The attachment to the policeman saves me from all anxiety, as Franz lives under his ample shadow.

“ By the way I think your little friend and H. D. are stopping somewhere in the neighbourhood. The hounds met here yesterday morning, and Franz followed, armed with a walking-stick, bearing a stag’s-head top, intended to slaughter the fox with it if he came too near. I expect he got pretty roundly sworn at. He reported on his return that he had seen Miss Yorke riding with a gentleman in a red coat and a cylinder. (For cylinder please read top-hat.) The truth of his statement was verified by his note-book. Hitchin Dawly’s horse, taking a bank too high, and telescoping the cylinder into an overhanging bough, was a deal too clever to be unrecognisable.”

A week passed uneventfully. Ernest’s next jotting was inscribed on a luggage label, enclosed in a railway envelope.

“ Sorry, but I can’t lay my hands on anything else,” ran the missive. “ En route for the Isle of Wight. Franz has been arrested as a German spy; the *verlobt* as an accomplice. The *verlobt* in plain clothes was utilising a

holiday to shepherd Franz on an instructive tour of our peace-protected shores. It was that note-book did it! He was discovered within forbidden ground, sketching a fortress—I have no doubt with convincing accuracy. The hairy giant being unable to convince the authorities that he was only a policeman in disguise, they were both placed under arrest. Of course, the whole thing is ridiculous, and I anticipate no difficulty in getting Franz released. Don't like the look of the crossing. Lumpy!"

But, although the whole thing was ridiculous, it gave Ernest some trouble to prove that it was. The charge against the policeman was dismissed. Two days later Ernest wrote:

"Franz has confused matters considerably by posing, or rather imposing, as a non-innocent! He is glorying in this dazzle of notoriety. He courts suspicion. He was found secreting fragments of a German post card in his socks, and he pretends he can't speak a word of English. I believe the authorities know that he's bluffing and the thing's a farce; but there are certain formalities to be gone through. It may be a day or two before I get him out."

The release was effected much too tamely for Franz. Ernest, wishing to avoid publicity had arranged that a closed motor should convey the hero of the occasion direct from the polic



station to the boat which was to convey him across to Southampton. In the early hours of a raw January morning the flight was planned, and Franz was successfully smuggled out of the Island which had conferred on him the honour of notoriety. Ernest, under the impression that all danger was over, took his charge to an hotel to have breakfast, but the spy scare had excited interest, and publicity had run on ahead. It met the escape-party in the lounge of the hotel. From seemingly nowhere, the special correspondent of a popular daily, a lady journalist, and a couple of photographers armed with cameras appeared with simultaneous intent. Franz was pounced upon, and hustled into the embrasure of a large window, and a battery of enquiry hailed upon him.

Ernest groaned in spirit, and, retiring as far from the little crowd as would enable him to watch the scene unnoticed, he seated himself on a lounge and prepared to wait.

"I can't prevent it, and it will afford him such ineffable joy," he murmured.

Franz revelled in the situation. There was to be compensation after all. He played his part with dignity; and remembering that he had asserted that he could not speak English, he discoursed pompously in German. The lady journalist evidently found this a little discon-

certing, but the newspaper correspondent never faltered. His pen ran glibly on; he knew what his readers expected to hear. The cameras meanwhile were busy immortalising Franz's plain little person.

Ernest took out his watch and looked at the time. If the interview lasted much longer they would have to miss either breakfast or their train. The door of the *table d'hôte* room stood near, and every time it opened and shut the smell of coffee and frizzled bacon was wafted through it. In the furtive haste of the early departure, Ernest had had no time to partake of any breakfast to speak of, and he was conscious of the fact that he wanted it. As the door opened for about the twentieth time, he felt almost insulted to see that the man who had just passed out was Hitchin Dawly. He looked sleek and comfortable, and was in the act of lighting a cigarette. He passed on to where a large pile of luggage was packed into a space beside the front entrance, and it was evident, from the orders that he gave to a man in charge, that it was to be sent down to the docks. Having said all that he had to say, he strolled over to the bureau and engaged the attention of the clerk in settling his bill.

Ernest could not avoid seeing and overhearing what was going on. Hitchin Dawly

had not noticed the small excitement of which Franz was the centre, but, as he made his way leisurely back towards the *table d'hôte* room, he saw Ernest and recognised him by a nod. To Ernest's surprise he seemed inclined to enter into conversation. A few vague generalities led to nothing, and then Hitchin Dawly indicated with a wave of his cigarette the pile of luggage.

"Just waiting about," he said, "until it's time to go down to the docks and get on board my boat." He thumped his chest rather ostentatiously. "Egypt! This villainous climate."

Going all the way by sea?" said Ernest.

Hitchin Dawly coughed. "Harley Street orders," he wheezed.

It struck Ernest that January was not the most propitious time of year for a sea trip to the Mediterranean, but he did not say so.

Hitchin Dawly coughed again as he blew out a cloud of smoke, and waxed communicative.

"Just come on from stopping with some people in the New Forest. Big party. Miss Yorke was there. You know Miss Yorke? Yes, of course, you've got a billet somewhere down in Squire Yorke's part of the world? Met you there, did not I? Beastly old bear, the Squire." He laughed his cracky laugh. "You've heard the news, I suppose? Twins! A brace of sons to carry on the family honours.

Rather a facer for little Miss Yorke. Pretty well snuffed out, eh? ”

Ernest glanced up quickly. The cynical face looking down at him wore an ugly sneer; the apparent indifference was not very convincing. Hitchin Dawly had had a nasty jar, and his temper was at the raw edge of vindictiveness. He was running away from the situation into which he had trapped himself; there could be no doubt about that.

Ernest was conscious of a profound feeling of relief.

“Twins! Dear, dear, how very satisfactory,” he murmured. He raised his voice a little. “I am exceedingly obliged to you for telling me the news. I had not heard. I think it is a matter for congratulation.”

There was no response, and Ernest allowed the silence to fall blank. When he spoke he changed the subject.

“And so you are off to Egypt? Are you to be away for long? ”

A shrug of the shoulders was the answer, and a return of the wheezy cough. The luggage was being taken out of the recess by the door, and Ernest anticipated the end of the interview.

“I hope you will have a pleasant journey,” he said.

Hitchin Dawly’s smile was sickly. He mur-

mured something which might be an echo to the hope; and, the hall porter coming up and claiming his attention, he added something to the effect that Ernest had seen the last there was to see of him, and moved away.

Ernest was left soliloquising. "I quite understand what I'm expected to do, and under the circumstances I'm not unwilling to be made useful. I'm to go back and report that I've seen him starting on a sea-voyage for the benefit of his health. That's the rôle he's taken up. He'll play it quite openly. There won't be any fuss; it will be a case of submitting to circumstances."

A shadow crossed his face. "Twins! I hope it's all right—I hope most sincerely it is all right."

Franz was seen approaching. Having been squeezed of all interest by his following they had deserted him.

"Franz," said Ernest, "I wish to breakfast at once."

"I too am ready," answered Franz, sniffing hungrily.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### THE AWAKENING OF MAISIE.

FOR the first time in her irresponsible little life, Maisie was forced into consciousness of the stirring of depths within her. She was passionately, terrifyingly aware, that an inner something, of which she had hitherto known nothing, a sense-teaching power of elementary force, had broken from its slumbers, and taken possession of her. Deep answers only to the call of deep; the shallows must be pierced ere the depths can make response.

The memory of the last few months, with all their dazzle of novelty and restless rush after pleasure, seemed to have curled up like a scroll of burnt paper, which leaves nothing but the grey ash behind. Childhood and girlhood seemed to be still further away. Maisie's memories held very few childish affections. They were empty little cupboards which ought to have been filled with the tenderness of mother-love, and which were not. She had not missed what had never been; she had only suffered from the not missing.

And now it was the present which held her in its grip; a present which was so full and yet so empty; so thinly clad with knowledge; so bewildering in its newness.

These two pink, puckered-faced morsels of humanity constrained and drew her with a fascination which was as unaccountable as it was compelling. She had stood at a distance from them at first, and stared at them in a kind of mesmerised awe. Then one day she had drawn near. She could not help it, she must look at them closely.

They were extraordinarily robust babies. Their little pugilistic buttings, their anxiety to push out, to begin their fight for a place in the big world, moved her with a passion of pity. When they made odd sneezy noises, and looked as though they were going to choke, pity turned to fear. What were they struggling for? What were they trying to express with their strenuous mimicry of vigour?

That day, for the first time, one had been put into her arms. The nurse, a kindly creature who was holding the child, had noticed the expression on the girl's face. Its strained whiteness against the severity of the black frock bore a pathetic significance.

Maisie found herself seated on a low rocking-chair with the swaddled bundle on her lap.

Such a helpless thing, and yet so strangely warm and alive. The small clenched fists worked insistently to free themselves from the flannel shawl; the little legs kicked spasmodically. She dared not move, she dared hardly breathe. She sat quite still; and the warmth and vitality emanating from the soft bundle seemed to permeate every fibre of her being. When the nurse relieved her of her burden, she stole noiselessly away, and, the instant the door had closed behind her, fled to the shelter of her own room. Throwing herself down on the bed, a flood of emotion overwhelmed her. The sobs of a frightened child were beating against the rising tide of awakened womanhood. The vague ambiguities of primitive blindness, of unthinking acceptance of life's mysteries, crumbled away before the sternness of nature's teaching. That little breathing, moving bundle of warmth, which she had just held in her arms, was life. Life born of life as she had been born; just as every child was born. She strove with an intensity of effort to apprehend.

"I've never taken the trouble to think. What am I? What am I meant to be? How does it matter what I make of myself? It must matter—Life goes on."

She buried her head in the muffling folds of the bed quilt.



"I laughed at everything she did. I scoffed at, and despised her. These little lives were given to her, and she had to go away and leave them—to be mothered—anyhow."

There were no sobs now. She was arraigning herself at the bar of her own judgment.

"I hate myself! Stupid, blind, selfish, cruel! It's no use being sorry. She will never know!"

Is there anything to equal the tragedy of that despairing cry after the unrecallable? "If I had only known. If I could only have that lost opportunity given back to me?"

Unflinchingly Maisie set up before her the relentless judge of self. Youth is pitiless when it demands to suffer. It condemns without mercy; it loses its delicacy of balance in its determination to probe. The blister must burn; the sensitive thing must quiver under the lash.

"I wish that all the unkind, cruel things I did and said and thought would rise up and throw themselves at me," she told herself vehemently. Unconsciously she was expressing in her own language the words of the Psalmist of old:

"These things hast thou done—I will reprove thee and set them in order before thine eyes."

As she called on the self-witnesses of memory, the imprints were recorded. Set in

order before her eyes were the proofs of their own proving.

She lay quite still, pressing her fingers tightly against her temples; thought was rapid, but chaotic. Her nerves were all on edge and jangled painfully. Her mind jumped from one point of retrospect to another, grasping a foothold here, only to find that it had merged itself there into the hurrying surge of something else. There was the recollection of her home-coming in the gloom of closing day; the shrouded house and the ungraspable suddenness of what had happened paralysed reality. An aloofness seemed to hold her at bay from all that was wont to be familiar and ordinary. It was a dread of what could be felt and was yet unvoiced, the pulse of new-born life beating side by side with the quiet of death; and below it all, heavy with import, a strange undercurrent of helplessness. No one knew what to do. Behind closed doors the master was unapproachable; his threshold dared not be crossed.

Out of all the confusion of first bewilderment, Maisie had been imperatively roused to action. A vivid realisation that the need of her was a necessity was thrust upon her. She was called upon to think and act on the immediate initiative. She had to assume knowledge and exercise authority. How she had risen to meet the

unexpected she never knew. It was as though a handful of tangled threads had been thrust into her hand, and as her hold tightened upon them, they had straightened and answered to her will. People wondered; some of them misunderstood, mistaking self-restraint for want of feeling. Was this suppression of all that was demonstrative a pardonable resentment against the unlooked-for upheaval of the old order of things?

To Maisie the formalities which apparently mattered so much were a relief and a misery in one. A relief because they claimed her attention, a misery because they tortured her as a mockery. That last day of the coming and going of the mourners! Would she ever forget it? It had all been so bleak and cold; so terribly remote. There had been no sad eyes who pleaded for one last look, no lingering in the darkened room to breathe a silent farewell to the quiet sleeper.

Out of courtesy to the Squire's position the funeral was largely attended; and, as the procession moved at a foot's pace down the long avenue, the effect was in the nature of a stately pageant, more impressive than anything that had ever happened in the life of the woman it sought to honour. The New Year was but a few days old, and a bitter wind swept the frost-

bound earth. The horses' coats stared dry and hard, and as they tucked in their tails, champing their bits, and flecking the foam impatiently, they chafed at the measured foot-pace at which they were driven.

A few relatives had returned to be warmed and fed before hurrying away to catch their respective trains. Maisie had never seen any of them before. No members of Mrs. Yorke's family had visited at the Manor. They appeared to be tepid, indefinite kind of people, and their coming had been a duty. They had gone away without leaving any impression of themselves behind.

All that was over now. Days of heavy burden and days of uneventfulness drift with like certainty into the tale of the past. The blinds had been pulled up, and one by one the needfuls of life had refitted themselves into their places. The daily round must go on.

Maisie raised her head at length, and absent-mindedly began to smooth out the creases she had made in the bed quilt. Her hands were cold; she felt cold all over. The window had been left wide open, and the chill air was blowing in upon her. She slipped from her position, and going over to the window closed it. Her head ached; she felt sick and listless and wandered about the room aimlessly. A reac-

tion had set in. She had been living at a high pressure of emotional excitement, and now a vacancy of outlook confronted her. As she moved about the room, small trivialities began to draw her by their claims of association. Her desultoriness grew less aimless. She noticed and touched familiar objects with purpose. She opened a drawer and turned over a handful of letters which had been hastily thrust into it. She collected them into a bundle, and sitting down on a low chair began to read them over. Maisie's correspondents were not numerous, and the letters were of condolence, of the usual conventional type. One or two of them were from the people who had meant so much to her of late. She wondered what it was about them that was wrong. Was it that her interest in the writers had vanished? How gaudy now seemed the time she had spent with these people in the looking back! Comparing it with the present, she felt it to have been a tricking out of shams. Extremes were yet to her so very extreme. She could not see beyond the sharp-cut line of contrasts.

She laid the letters aside, all except one, which she read again and again. It was from the man whom she had lightly accepted as her lover—her husband to be. She frowned over it, trying to puzzle out a something in it which

eluded her. For the first time it struck her that during these past days of stress she had never felt the need for him. No yearning for his sympathy or help, no physical want for his nearness had been present with her. When she tried to place him in any position where he would have shared her difficulties, imagination supplied either a blank or a disturbing influence. A terrible loneliness fell upon her. It was not that she wanted him, it was the sensation that an intensely living thing might feel when awakened to the consciousness that it was tied to something dead. All her warm, fresh young vitality rose up in revolt. Was she bound irrevocably?

She smoothed out the letter and read it over once more. A certain form of phrasing necessary to the conventional aspect of the subject only thinly veiled the cynicism of its undercurrent. No generous emotion was touched. It was all a light brushing over of what had to be acknowledged. There were no tendernesses, no shadowing of hopes. It withered out into the dry husks of platitude.

The letter had reached her with almost the first shock of her home-coming. It had not demanded an immediate answer, and she felt as though she were reading it now for the first time. Shallow and heartless, it reproved her; it set

before her the things she had done more forcibly than had her own condemnation of self. She was valued by the standards she had set up. She had been pleased to accept life according to the standards of this man. With careless inconsequence she had given herself to him. A hot tide of shamed humiliation swept over her at the thought; innate purity shrank aghast at its awakening, as the woman in her rose in revolt. A desire for freedom possessed her with a species of terror. She must get away from this dread which she could not put into words. The gloom of the big empty house cramped her, and drove her morbid thoughts in on herself. She replaced the letter in the drawer, and with impatient haste put on her out-of-door things, catching up whatever came nearest to her hand, and left the room. She did not go down the main staircase, because she would have to traverse the corridor and pass that door where the hush of a great quiet seemed always to linger.

It was still early in the afternoon. A white fog was beginning to rise from the lower reaches of the meadow lands; stealing wraith-like along the coppice banks and dimming the distance in the park glades. The hoar-frost lay thick on the ground, and, as she struck into one of the woodland paths, the turf gave with a crinkling

sound under her feet. The rapid movement began to warm her; her breath went out in a vapoury cloud, and she ran to leave it behind her. Young blood quickens easily; cold and cheerless as was the frost-bound world around her, it was as a cleansing bath to her fevered nerves, and she did not care where she went. She found herself at length, warm and panting, looking over the gate into the park, where she had once stood and watched her father and Johnnie ride past on their way back from the polo-ground. The scene came up before her as sharply outlined as a cameo. The warm summer evening and the low rays of sunlight filtering through the green foliage and lying in a yellow haze along the sward under the pony's feet. Flecks of it had burnished Dainty's coat, and made the white of Johnnie's shirt-sleeves shine luminously.

She turned sharply away from the gate, and then drew back in startled surprise. Were her eyes still full of the vision? Johnnie was coming down the track towards her.



That she should be alone in the desolate cold of these gloomy woods hurt him. The pity and the love and the direct simplicity of his concern for her was written on his face as he drew near, and she wanted it so badly.

But she shrank away from him. Once before she had hurt him bitterly; she had not then known how bitterly, because she knew so little of what that bitterness meant. She was to hurt him now, and she did it with a fierce energy of determination, because she was punishing herself the while.

"Don't look like that! I don't want you to be kind. Don't try to say nice things. I can't listen—I mustn't. Go away and leave me."

Johnnie checked his pace.

"I could not help following," he said humbly.

Maisie straightened her back against the gate and faced him. Her words tumbled out at random :

"I know—I know all the things you want to say. You're sorry and it's nice of you, but I'm not nice enough to listen. It makes me feel horrid and wicked to look at you."

Johnnie's face had clouded over at the first repulse; but now an expression of quiet determination came into it. The unnatural excitement which seemed to be quivering through

Maisie's whole body alarmed him and resolve took the place of pleading.

"I'm not going to bother you," he said gently. "Just let me walk back with you. I won't say a word if you don't want me to."

If he could only make Maisie understand that he knew everything and that there was nothing to explain. He understood, of course; but would she be reasonable and trust him?

"That brute," he ejaculated under his breath.

It was difficult to know what to say. He threw finesse to the winds.

"I know about Hitchin Dawly—that you've given him the sack," he said bluntly. "It wasn't your fault that he was a rotter."

There were a few moments painful silence. Maisie was staring at him blankly.

"Who told you?" she asked. All the fire and vehemence seemed to have ebbed away from her. Her voice hardly rose above a whisper.

"I didn't need to be told. I knew when I heard he had gone off like that," answered Johnnie.

Maisie turned her head aside. Her voice was still very low as she almost echoed the words, "You knew when you heard that he had gone off like that?"

"I didn't try to find out anything," said Johnnie. "When Ernest told me about having run up against him in Southampton—when he was starting off to catch his boat—I guessed of course."

"You guessed just from that?"

"Don't let's talk about it," was Johnnie's answer. "Shall we go back? It's too cold to stand about here."

Maisie moved away from the gate, and Johnnie fell into step by her side. He had said that he would not talk if she did not wish him to, and in an almost unbroken silence they passed through the wood. Maisie was absorbed in her own thoughts. Johnnie noted the tightened look about her mouth; between the delicately pencilled lines of her eyebrows a little pucker hovered. He would have liked to know what she was thinking about, but he left her alone. It was with a start of surprise that Maisie was roused from her abstraction, to find that they had left the woods behind and had entered the shelter of the gardens.

She stopped, and Johnnie knew that he was not intended to come any further. He had not expected that she would ask him into the house, but he was sorry. The Manor looked very grey and cheerless; he did not like to think of her going back to it in her present mood.

Maisie raised her hand to her forehead, and rubbed it with a gesture of impatience.

"I would like to explain, but I can't. I hate myself when I look back."

"Don't look back," said Johnnie.

She glanced up at him. There was pleading in her expression, but a certain defiance as well.

"I must." She averted her eyes, and added hurriedly. "Will—will you not talk about this—about me to anybody, please?"

"You know I would not do that," said Johnnie, grieved at such a question being asked him.

"Things get misunderstood. They are misunderstood already—I do not understand them myself," said Maisie, a little wildly.

Johnnie's grievance vanished. "Oh, bother misunderstandings. Let all that go rip. It's over. Forget about it."

"I can't," sighed Maisie. "Will you—will you promise not to ask me to explain until I do it of my own accord?" she asked.

And Johnnie promised. He did not seek to detain her after that; he watched her as she crossed the lawn and mounted the steps leading up to the terrace. She turned once and looked back, and his heart felt lighter than it had done for many a day. Something of the old Maisie belonged to him again.

Maisie paused for a moment, uncertain which door to enter by. The terrace looked very lifeless. Even on the coldest day of winter, the big glass doors, which led into the Squire's special quarters were generally to be found open; to-day they were closed. Maisie drew nearer, and looked in. She could see the shadowed outline of her father's figure leaning forward in a chair drawn up to the hearth. The doors were not fastened, and she pushed them open and entered.

The Squire glanced round sharply, and then, jerking himself back into his previous position, stretched forward and picked up the poker. There was nothing to poke in the dreary-looking grate; the neglected fire was smouldering out in a sullen glow.

Maisie knelt down on the rug, and, gathering some splinters from the wood-basket, tried to coax the embers into life. A pale flicker sprang up, and the Squire spread out his hands to it. He had stiff, rather dumpy fingers, and his knuckles were blue with cold.

"You ought not to have let the fire get so low. It feels quite raw in here," said Maisie.

The Squire grunted out something unintelligible. The fire crackled and sent out stronger spurts of flame, and he stretched his fingers over

it until each one stood apart and the warmth glowed through them.

Maisie rose abruptly, and stood looking down. These cold blue hands appealed to her sympathy, but it was something else which brought the smart of tears to her eyes. Her father was wearing round his wrists a pair of red worsted mittens, and the tops protruded about an inch beyond the line of his cuff. Her eyes had rested on them at first with a vague memory haunting her, and then she remembered. Mrs. Yorke had given them to him. It had been a hot summer's day, and the recipient had turned them over dubiously. They bore evidence of having been laboriously knitted; and one was long and lean, and the other short and baggy. Mrs. Yorke had apologised for the discrepancies in size. She admitted that she had confused the number of stitches with some other calculation. The mittens would look nice and warm for the winter, and they were just the right colour to match his hunting coat, she had suggested.

Maisie remembered the incident quite well, and reflected that she had turned the sentiment of it into ridicule. Her father had put the mittens into his pocket and said nothing. However much the Squire had blustered when his wife's fads rubbed him up the wrong way, he

had never laughed at her in public. Now, as he stretched his arms forwards, and the red mittens shot out into view, it somehow soothed him to look at them. If he had clothed himself in the gloom of a mute, he could not have shown more genuine deference to the symbols of mourning than he did by wearing these little red worsted mittens.

Maisie heard the tinkle of teacups, sounds intimating that tea was being taken into the drawing-room. She did not quite know what put the inspiration into her brain; but, leaving the room, she recalled a vanishing footman laden with a tray, and gave some orders. Then she returned.

Ten minutes later a low table, with oddly contrived side flaps which gave plenty of elbow room, was drawn close up to the fireside, and laid on it was the kind of sportsman's tea, which from childhood's days she remembered as being the culminating joy of many a good day's hunt. She drew in the old leather stool, upon which she had been wont to sit. She could see herself in the past: a small figure in a mud-spattered habit, with wind-blown hair fluffing in a ruddy cloud from under her hunting cap. What struggles she had, had with the teapot, almost as big as herself! How she had chattered, illustrating her pert criticisms with a running

accompaniment of facile gesture? She was allowed the full length of her tether so long as she amused; then would come the sharp pushing back of the tea-table, and the usual peremptory dismissal:

“Now, then! Off you go, little devil!”

She had never resented the curtness of the dismissal; she had always accepted with jaunty indifference the word of command. The mud would have dried on the splashed habit by then; she remembered how it used to crack off in flakes as she kicked her way across the polished boards.

The Squire suddenly wheeled round his chair, and came face to face with the table. He regarded it with a momentary frown, and then from force of habit vaguely fumbled for the leg of the flap which turned up at his end. He began to move the plates about, after a manner he had of disarranging any set form of arrangement. The boiled eggs, bulging out of their egg-cups; the home-made loaf, crisp from the oven; the slab of golden butter with the imprint of his own dairy-mark on it, made up a familiar blend of association. He was conscious of feeling hungry. He had of late fallen into the habit of snatching a furtive meal when and where he chose. Maisie had not remonstrated. She reproached herself now for having left him



so much to himself. She began to pour out tea. The froth on the top of the cream jug was almost frozen, and she had to stir it round with a spoon. The jug did not seem to be so full as usual.

"Are we short of cows?" she remarked, more for the sake of saying something than out of enquiry. The Squire was stirring a lump of frozen froth into his tea. He gave a jerk of his chin upwards.

"They've got to have a cow apiece," he said.

Maisie knew what he meant by "they!" It was the first direct allusion to his sons that her father had yet made to her. She allowed the subject to drop. Conversation did not languish, but it was confined to small matters of ordinary interest.

The fire was now blazing up the chimney. All that had appeared so dull and desolate a short time ago was warmed into life. The jovial-faced ancestors looked down from their frames and approved. They had seen many troublings of the waters; but the pool always settled again. It was the law of the inexorable. They also had had their hour; they were lookers-on now.

The Squire pushed away the table, and bumped back into his chair. He was warmed and fed; the blue numbed look had vanished,

but he did not seem at ease. He thumped the cushions and tried to elbow himself into a comfortable position, but the springs of the chair only creaked and refused to be accommodating. This was the time, in bygone days, when Maisie had been wont to get her dismissal. She took no notice of the signs of restlessness; she did not mean to go away, for she had something to say. She twisted herself round on the slippery old leather stool, and, clasping her knees, sat looking into the fire.

"Did you know that Hitchin Dawly had gone away?" she said at length. "Right away, I mean."

The Squire started up in his chair.

"The devil he has!" he ejaculated. "You've given him the sack then?"

Maisie had tacitly allowed the conclusion to which Johnnie's mind had rushed, but she did not allow it with her father.

"You've put it the wrong way about," she said quietly. "I did not send him away."

"Why the devil didn't you?" burst out the Squire, whose expletives were never very varied. His eyes snapped angrily, and the bristles of his moustache seemed to start out like a fighting terrier's.

"I did not know he had gone away until—I only heard to-day."

Maisie still spoke in the same quiet voice. She saw that her father was again about to break forth, and she laid her hand on the arm of his chair.

"Don't! It's all over. Leave it alone—I'd rather."

The Squire looked down at her hand. It lay close to where the red line of one of the mittens was visible.

He coughed and cleared his throat. A difficulty in finding speech had suddenly fallen upon him. The red mittens helped him, for Maisie touched each one separately before she drew away her hand.

"She would be pleased if she knew," she said softly.

The Squire's face was twitching, and his voice stammered huskily.

"She was terribly upset about—you. About them——"

He broke off and did not finish the sentence.

"They come first now, I know"; and Maisie turned away and sat looking into the fire as she had done before. She had known after a fashion, but with the uttering of the words she was conscious of a fullness of understanding which she had not had before. Facts and circumstances marshalled themselves in their relative order before her mental vision. The

letter, over which she had so puzzled that afternoon before her meeting with Johnnie, thrust itself into the forefront of her thoughts. She knew now what it meant; and, humiliating though the knowledge was, she welcomed it, as a captive welcomes the breaking of his fetters.

She rose slowly and stood by the mantelshelf. "I quite understand; I know exactly what it all means," she said.

At the tone of her voice the Squire glanced up. He was not in the habit of trying to put himself in the place of other people and endeavouring to understand from their point of view. But that touch on his arm, and those red mittens, and that subtle sense of feminine warmth and comfort which Maisie had brought into the chill loneliness of the grey afternoon had given him a strange yearning for something outside himself. He did not know how to express sympathy, or how to show that he wanted it for himself.

The feelings which were working within him were transparently evident, and perhaps Maisie was learning to see with the intent to see. Her pity went out to him. He had always been so autocratic, so independent, so sturdy in his disdain for soft things and soft places.

Stooping down she slipped her arm through

his, and forcibly made him rise from his chair. Her eyes were shining; and there was almost laughter in her voice, the laughter that trembles on the verge of tears.

“Come and see them—with me!” she commanded. “I’m not a bit jealous of them.”

That night, before she went to bed, Maisie burnt her unlover-like letter, but she answered it before consigning it to the flames. It did not demand an answer, and its negativeness made her task a difficult one. “But I sha’n’t feel safe until I’ve done it,” she told herself, and she persevered. Her letter was a generous letter, one which the recipient knew that he did not deserve. It made Hitchin Dawly feel more ashamed of himself than was comfortable for his peace of mind.

Maisie felt that a great weight had been lifted off her, and that she would like to give thanks, in some way, for the gift of her freedom. It was late, and the household had retired for the night. An idea came to her. Could she carry it out? She opened her door and all was in darkness; but she did not give herself time to hesitate. Catching up one of the lighted candles from the dressing-table, she passed swiftly out and down the stairs leading to the nurseries. Two rooms opened one into the other, and, leaving her light to flicker in the

draught of the passage she tried the handle of the outer door. She did not make enough noise to frighten a mouse, and it turned noiselessly. The inner door stood wide open, and a night-light burned on a table by the nurse's bed. The sound of regular breathing told of profound slumber, and faintly out of the dimness loomed the two little cots. They were together, but a space separated them, and, though it was very small, it sufficed. Maisie crept into it, and laid the lightest of touches on each of the white coverlets. She could feel the warmth of what lay beneath.

She whispered very softly under her breath.

"Dear little things. You couldn't help coming, and you've saved me. I will always remember that, and you shall always be first. I love you to be first."

She put her lips first to one little muslin curtain and then to the other. She dared not venture to make the faintest sound of a caress. It was the breathing out of her thank-offering. The next moment she had slipped from the room as noiselessly as she had entered.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### A FAREWELL FETE.

THE tremulous whisper of budding life was rustling through the land. All the little newly awakened eyes, all the little busily working fingers, all the sweet piping voices were astir, and feeling their way to strength.

From the swelling verdure of mother earth rose the song; from the cloud-dappled blue trilled the bird-like echo. Spring had come.

The daffodils pricked out their yellow skirts, and tossed their heads in pretty disdain to the kiss of the hastening breeze. The life blood of fruition was flushing the first throb of rapture to the opening blossoms on the orchard boughs, and the riot of spring babbled in the laughing brook, as it sped blithely on its way to pour its love-gift into the stream. The ecstasy of giving was everywhere.

"The march of the seasons," murmured Ernest. "Midsummer will soon be rounc again."

He checked the chestnut's pace to a standstill on the brow of the ridge overlooking the common. Almost a year ago he had halted on the same spot. Then, it had been early morning, with the dew still filming the grass; now it was afternoon. The gorse was abloom, and a splendour of golden glory rolled in billows before him, reflecting the pathway of the western sun.

He only paused momentarily before striking the sandy road which meandered lazily across the flats beneath. He was proceeding at a foot's pace and glanced back occasionally over his shoulder. He smiled involuntarily as memory recalled the past vision of a small follower. Eli Blades and his dead sparrow had resulted in such a delightful discovery. On this occasion there was nothing exciting to discover in his follower. It was Franz, and he knew why he was there; one common interest was drawing them to the same point.

Franz was about to bid adieu to the shores of England, and a farewell party was to be given that afternoon at the thatched cottage in his honour. Franz was much gratified at what he considered a public notice being taken of his departure. He was sorry to go; but he considered that he had learnt everything that



there was to learn, and he must now return to the Fatherland and make use of his knowledge.

Ernest stopped to allow his follower to make up to him. Franz was carrying a quantity of little parcels which were looped on to strings, and which bobbed and jumped with every movement of his body. Although the day was mild, he had cumbered himself, as usual, with a heavy overcoat, leaving the sleeves to dangle loose.

"Hand some of these things up to me," said Ernest, as Franz panted alongside; but the offer of help was repudiated with scorn. Franz would not even stop to discuss the question. He had no breath to waste on discussions, and with sleeves flapping he hastened onwards.

The cottage wore quite a festive air. Newly starched curtains, crimped to a nicety by Mrs. Fancy, fluttered from the lattices, and flowers wreathed every available point of vantage. Maisie had lavished such a wealth of daffodils and primroses on the decking out of Sunshine's new parlour that it looked as though a bit of nature's own had been captured and imprisoned there. The western window was flooded with mellow light and Sunshine's couch was drawn up to it, and the tea-table laid close to her hand. Every time the mysterious little door, which had been hidden for so long behind the wood-

stack, opened and shut to allow of Mrs. Fancy to bustle through, the ingratiating odour which rises from hot buns when the sugar is beginning to brown on the top was wafted on the air. Every time she passed through the door, Mrs. Fancy made the same remark, "'Ere I comes poppin' again." She was so brimming over with hospitality and so worked up to a state of bubbling exuberance, that to repeat the same thing over and over again was a relief to her feelings.

"It wasn't intended to be a fussy party, but it seems to be developing into quite a fête," said Sunshine. "In ten minutes the guests will be arriving. Are we quite ready?"

The question was addressed to Maisie, who was putting some finishing touches to the top of the cake. Two little flags bearing the national colours of England and Germany were being planted side by side.

"Quite ready," said Maisie. "Where did this beautiful cake come from?"

"Johnnie," answered Sunshine. "It was rather sweet of him to think of it, wasn't it?"

Maisie did not respond at once. She came to the side of Sunshine's couch and stood there. She still held one of the little flags between her fingers, and was twisting it round and round nervously.

"Do you remember that time you scolded me for saying unkind things about—you know? It was the day of the children's party," she said.

"I remember," answered Sunshine. "But I did not mean to scold. I——"

Maisie broke in hurriedly. "I deserved what you said. How it hurt! But—— How can I explain? I had not enough sense to make use of why it hurt. I was sorry for myself, but I wasn't sorry for having hurt her. Does that sound nonsense, or can you understand?"

"I think I can understand," said Sunshine. "You wouldn't say things like that now—you could not."

"I wonder?" Maisie sighed. "I've always gone my own way. I've never troubled about what lay underneath. I did not want to know."

"It's different now. You want to know, isn't that it?" said Sunshine.

"Do I?"

Maisie sighed again. "I still feel like skimming along on the top. I wish I could get deeper. It's as if I knew that there was an inner current somewhere, and that if I could only get caught into it, I should be swept along by something strong and deep that gets to the very heart of things. But—how am I to get in?"

She had been standing with her back to the

window. She moved, and the light fell more fully on her. Her eyes sought Sunshine's face, in eager questioning.

"I wonder if you can understand this kind of feeling? It comes over me often; as though I wanted to be conscious to hurting, of each minute."

Sunshine looked away. It pained her to read the question in those bright eager eyes. This was the first time that Maisie had either offered confidence or sought it. She had of late come and gone almost daily to the cottage; but, though much of her old impulsive self had returned, a reticence guarded the inner sanctuary of what was herself, and withheld her from betrayal. She had never alluded to the breaking off of her engagement. All that had happened concerning that episode had been tacitly ignored.

"Maisie! Are you trying to punish yourself?" said Sunshine softly. "Don't be selfish about it."

"Selfish!" Maisie flushed up in startled surprise. She knew that she was not being rebuked, but she did not understand.

"Yes, selfish," repeated Sunshine. "Don't turn the punishment into a scourge. Give out of your best. You will be caught into the inner current that way. You will be swept along by

something strong and deep that gets to the very heart of things, but don't try to hurt your poor little heart by punishing it because it wants to be loved. It knows what it wants. Listen to it, trust it."

Sounds of an arriving guest were heard from without. Franz had just hurried through the wicket gate with his load of parcels. There was no time to say anything more, but Sunshine felt that she had said enough. She knew that by the look on Maisie's face as she turned away.

The party was an enormous success. That an air of rejoicing might be out of place, considering that it was a farewell gathering, did not seem to occur to anyone, least of all to Franz. He was brimming over with elation; and, if he lapsed occasionally into pomposity, it was pardonable. The moment that tea was over, he shot up from his chair, and, clicking his heels together, made a series of bows to the various members of the party, and then hurried out into the garden.

A look of consternation passed round the group left behind.

"Do you think he's feeling ill?" asked Sunshine anxiously.

"These little silver balls off the cake," suggested Maisie.

"I know what it is," said Ernest, lowering

his voice. "He's going to give us all presents. He passed me on the road dangling with parcels."

"Will he expect presents from us?" said Sunshine rather aghast.

"I presume so."

It was then that Johnnie came to the rescue.

"Let's collect some," he said looking round. He patted the arm of Sunshine's couch reassuringly. "We'll take only the things you say you don't want. Anything will please him."

When Franz returned, his arms full, and the generous glow of prospective giving flushing his cheeks, he was met on the threshold and almost swept off his feet by the attentions which were showered upon him. He had to drop his parcels in order to leave his arms free to receive the gifts which were thrust into them. Each giver was armed with a gigantic posy, hastily snatched from the decorations around. The posy added enormously to the effect, and disguised the gift from immediate criticism.

At the last moment Johnnie bethought himself of Mrs. Fancy. He routed her out of the kitchen, hurried her through the jam cupboard by the mysterious little door, and presented her with a posy which took both hands to hold.

"She makes such a splendid show, and she's got a bag of ginger-nuts in her pocket," he

whispered to Maisie, and Maisie looked up at him and laughed. It was all so ridiculous, but it was so nice to laugh with Johnnie again.

Franz acquitted himself with great dignity, considering how very little could be seen of him under the deluge of flowers. He made a beautiful speech, and stood on a chair to make it. He assured the company of the high esteem in which he held them and the English nation in general. Then he touched on the delicate subject of the spy episode, hinting at matters which honour forbade him to divulge. His loyalty to England was unswerving, but—and he paused dramatically before uttering a warning.

“You was altogether wrong to put me in prison, because I learn a great deal more inside than I do out. I learn secrets. Oh, yes!”

The passion of the orator swelled within him. He threw back his shoulders and tore open the top button of his shirt.

“Look at this beautiful white bosom! Many secrets are here. You think I am not profound enough to keep a secret? My heart is full of them. They spreads right across from one side to the other, and they goes down——”

He made a snatch at another button, but Mrs. Fancy, whose eyes had been growing rounder

and rounder as Franz's excitement increased, here stepped forward.

"No, no, my dear. Not that other button, if you please. You gets forgettin' as your company's mixed."

Mrs. Fancy's tone was mild, but her attitude was determined. She looked as though she were quite capable of lifting Franz off the chair bodily. Whatever happened Franz was determined to have the last word. He flung out his arms and his voice rose shrilly.

"My frients! I bid you farewell! I came not in disgeese, I return not as a spy to betray the secrets which I carry in my bosom. I go at home. Have no fears, I am the frient of England."

This triumph of declamation evoked a burst of applause; and Franz descended majestically from his chair, and began distributing the contents of his parcels.

He had sent to Germany for his farewell offerings, and they were presented with such genuine trust in their power to please, that their very inappropriateness was an incentive to like them. Sunshine had never dreamt of possessing a pair of coral earrings, nor Mrs. Fancy a beer tankard with a pictured lid and a silver handle. Ernest and Johnnie almost came to blows over the choosing of two enormous



hookah-like pipes with which they were presented. Maisie was touched to tears by receiving a photograph of Franz himself framed in Edelweiss.

"Dear little Boat-a-hoy! I wish I had been nicer to him," she confided to Johnnie.

At last it was all over, and Sunshine lay listening to the sounds of departure. There was a halt at the gate; some difference evidently had arisen as to the parting of the ways. Franz's voice was heard upraised, and Maisie's laugh was borne back to her. She was tired, she told herself—at least she put it that way. There had been just a little drag on the chain as she had watched them go. The spring evening was so fresh and joyous, the light so pure and liquid. How good the turf would smell as their footsteps pressed it, how the scent of the gorse would linger as they brushed aside its prickly armour!

She turned her face to the western window, and the cool air played about her forehead. She thought she was alone, and the guard was down. A shadow darkened the doorway. It was Ernest.

"I found that I had left my beautiful German pipe behind me," he said.

But he took what seemed to be an unnecessarily long time to find his pipe. Perhaps he

had divined something of that little drag on the chain, because when he came over to the window, he remarked, quite irrespective of pipes :

“What a joy it would be if one could break right out of bounds just once in a way. Let oneself go——”

Sunshine flushed a little. - Whether he understood or not, he had said something which was human and comforting.

“The party was a triumph,” continued Ernest. “No, I won’t stop, you’ve had enough of us. I only offer my congratulations.”

“Do you think they went away happier for having been here?” asked Sunshine.

“Happier and better. Not this time only, but always. It’s been that from the beginning.”

Ernest’s voice deepened. There was a question in its tone—not a demand, but the feeling out for an assurance.

“Do you remember? It’s just about a year since it all began. Do you feel that you stand just where you did then, or have the capacities of the borders widened?”

Sunshine pondered for a moment or two before answering.

“Widened—Yes. And yet I don’t seem to have done much. I very nearly lost Maisie.”

"But it was you who kept Johnnie! It wasn't the girl. It was you."

"What do you mean by that?" said Sunshine slowly.

"Johnnie has been living in what you made for him."

Ernest glanced round. "All here! All this—home building, we'll call it. It was your atmosphere; it was the atmosphere through which he saw her. He wanted to see her in it, and his latent instincts found expression in what he did. Primitive if you like, it was the natural man working in him, though he was only half conscious of it. The protector was being developed in him: the responsibility of the human to its own inner consciousness."

"But Maisie was very nearly lost," reiterated Sunshine.

"She wasn't lost. She was only finding herself, and it were better she should do her own finding. She's that sort, and she had set up no ideals. Johnnie's different. After a fashion of his own, he has ideals. It would have gone hard with him had they been broken."

Sunshine lay silent for a while.

"It is to you that I owe the widening of my boundaries," she said at length. She raised her eyes and looked at him. "I want you to know that."

“Must there always be boundaries?”

A great sadness of tender pity vibrated through Ernest's voice as he asked the question. She evaded its directness.

“The shifting sands of other lives,” she said slowly. “My boundaries are defined. It makes it easier perhaps.”

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### BY THE STILE.

THE little demonstration at the wicket gate, regarding the parting of the ways, resulted in Franz and Johnnie and Maisie all converging into the same path.

Franz's last sight of the cottage embraced a vision of Mrs. Fancy feeding the old chestnut with lumps of sugar out of her apron, and Daisy White looking on.

"We can all go as far as the stile together," said Maisie, and so in the direction of the stile they bent their steps.

It was an evening to linger over; but when they reached the stile Franz showed no inclination to linger. From the heights of sentiment he had descended to the practical. He was full of the busy-ness of departure.

"I have much packings to make. It is necessary that I go at home," he asserted; and neither of his companions demurred to the assertion.

He kissed Maisie's hand, and wished her a great many compliments at parting. He had

insisted upon carrying away all the posies with which he had been presented, and, as he trotted down the side of the hedge-row, an aurora of light and colour seemed to encircle and follow him.

Johnnie and Maisie were left standing by the stile, and they watched Franz pass out of sight. It seemed as though Maisie were going to take the shortest route homeward across the paddock, and then she hesitated. She did not look at Johnnie, but irresolution was in her air and attitude, and Johnnie waited. If she gave him his dismissal, he must take it as he had so often taken it before; but he longed with an unutterable longing for her to show that she did not want to send him away.

It was the first time that they had been alone together since that bitter winter's day, when Johnnie had found Maisie wandering in the desolateness of the woods. They both remembered that day, but the remembrance of it was perhaps more vividly present with Maisie than it was with Johnnie. She wanted to talk to him about it, and yet did not know how to begin. He had been so good to her, had so comforted and taken care of her. He had not exacted anything, only tried to make her understand that he knew and understood. He had been under a misapprehension, and she had allowed

him to remain under the misapprehension. She had also exacted a promise from him.

"Promise not to ask me to explain until I do it of my own accord."

And Johnnie had promised unhesitatingly, he knew not what.

It had given her a feeling of security, that promise, as though she had confided to his care something that she wanted kept in safety until she asked for it again. She had not bound him with intent to deceive. It was only, that, at the moment, she had been too bewildered to know what to do, or what to say.

Maisie looked at the stile.

"I ought to go back. I'm wanted, but——"

And then she sat down on the stile.

Johnnie gave a sigh of relief, and seated himself beside her.

Maisie began to talk hurriedly, a self-consciousness of something like panic taking possession of her.

"I oughtn't to stay. I said I would be back in time to—to help Mrs. Slippington to choose new hats for the babies. Imagine them being old enough to wear hats. They're always tearing them off each other's heads, and then their red curls stand on end, and they shout! They're learning to shout just like father, and he loves it."

She paused to take breath, and then asserted more decisively than before that she could not stay. She must go back.

"Does Mrs. Slippington still wear her yellow wig?" asked Johnnie. The diplomacy of asking such a simple question was reassuring, and Maisie laughed.

"Of course! But she is a dear, a real good sort. And when I remember!"

Her voice fell, and the affected lightness died out of it. Of a sudden there seemed to be no necessity to keep up the flimsy defence of make-believe.

"When I look back, Johnnie, I am so dreadfully ashamed of myself."

She had called him by his name, and it had slipped out quite naturally. All her past flippancies and little cruelties, the wilful sayings and doings, the showing of herself in lights which had pained and distressed him, were confessed in that one uttering of his name.

Johnnie was afraid to move or speak for fear of chilling the sweet warmth of her nearness. He was seated on the lower step of the stile, and Maisie was a little above him. She bent forward, leaning her arms on her knees, and her head was just on a level with his ear. He would have had to lean back to look at her, but she did not want him to do that.



"Let me talk, please. Sit quite still and listen."

Johnnie's eyelids quivered, but that was all. When she began to accuse herself and he heard the little catch in her voice, it was difficult to keep from betraying what was battling within him. He would have liked to silence her after a fashion of his own; but he allowed her to say what she wanted to say because it was her wish.

Once reserve was broken, Maisie found it so easy to talk. The morbidity of self-torture could not exist when it was Johnnie who was listening. She had not to choose her words; it did not seem to matter how she expressed herself. It was as though she were listening with the pity of love to her own heart's out-pouring. Just once, timidly, she advanced a plea.

"I was never taught to think. Perhaps I'll learn—I'm very young."

"We're both very young," said Johnnie, and he could not have said anything more comforting.

He drew a little nearer and his shoulder touched her dress.

"Johnnie?" Maisie's voice faltered, but she went on. "You remember that day you followed me through the woods, and you said

you understood! You didn't, but I let you think that you did, and afterwards? I asked you not to try to find out—that I couldn't explain. It was all so raw and new—I—you can't think how perfectly sick I was with myself, and with everything."

"Don't, Maisie. Don't hurt yourself," said Johnnie.

Maisie's own impulsive self broke forth.

"I'm not hurting myself. I'm doing myself good. It doesn't hurt to explain now. I want to. I couldn't then, because—just because I couldn't! Johnnie, I didn't break off my engagement. You thought I had; but I never was given the chance. I didn't know, until you told me, that he had gone away. The day you found me I was all in a maze and horribly frightened. I had been worrying myself silly over trying to understand what it all meant, and then, when you told me that he had gone away, it was as if I had been walking blindfold and somebody had suddenly taken the bandages off my eyes. Then I understood."

Johnnie turned himself slowly round on the step. Maisie had never seen hot anger blazing in Johnnie's eyes before. Up to where the whiteness of his forehead showed above the tan, a flush of red rose and darkened.

“The—the——,” he stuttered. With a quick gesture of protest Maisie threw out her hands; they fell and rested on his shoulders.

“Oh Johnnie, the saving of it. If I had never found out?”

Her lips quivered, and a mist of tears dimmed her eyes. The next minute Johnnie’s strong young arms were round her.

Johnnie entered into the kingdom of his manhood then; he had won his love. He had loved her through many stages. He had been loyal in spite of disillusionments; a dogged persistence of faithfulness had held him true to her. He had gone on loving her because he couldn’t help it; and now she was his to love for all time. The passion of the near and dear and possessive was to be his.

Maisie was humbled into awe before the wealth of love which was poured out to her; for, when the barriers were broken down, Johnnie made no pretence of holding back the knowledge of what his love had meant to him. His self-control during these past months had cost him much, and he had often fretted against restraint, but the self-imposed discipline had been strengthening the foundations of a depth in his character with silent sureness.

Maisie had not fully realised his unselfishness

until the humility of love revealed to her on what her trust had been resting. A great longing welled up in her heart that he should think the best of her—that he should be able to trust her as she had learnt to trust him—but she was torn with misdoubts that she ought not to let him say the things he was saying. They were sweet to her ears, but she ought not to listen to them. More than once she remonstrated :

“ You must not. I am not good like that. I never shall be.”

But Johnnie, with the exultance of the conqueror throbbing through his veins, was in no mood for rebuke. He courted opposition. A subdued Maisie who deprecated her own powers, who quivered at his touch, who looked a little afraid of him, was a thing so intoxicating in its novelty as to send his head spinning. He was no longer a suppliant: he was victor. When she put her hand over his mouth and tried to silence him, it was caught and the other likewise. She was held at his mercy.

“ I’m so happy. I must let it out. You’d understand if you knew how it’s been held up. Oh Maisie, it is good! Say it’s good.”

And Maisie answered.

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He leant back, and the sunny sheen of his hair shone against the black of her gown.

“I don’t want you to be different. You’re what I want, and—I know what to expect.”

Johnnie’s trust was sublime in its confidence. He knew what to expect.

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